

# THE POLITICS OF Preschool –

intentions and decisions underlying the emergence  
and growth of the Swedish preschool

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## Preface

A typical day in early autumn. Pick-up at preschool and then a snack. I cut up an apple and pass half of it to my three-year-old daughter. “No, daddy,” she says, with a know-all expression that only a three-year-old can muster, “I want a quarter of an apple”. So I smile, take the apple half and cut it once more. Same expression: “No, daddy, I only want an eighth of an apple.” They had been playing with numbers, whole and fractions, in preschool that day.

In the often gloomy debate over Swedish schools, I am sometimes asked the rhetorical question: “Do you remember when international groups came for study visits to learn from the Swedish school system?” I usually problematise the issue, pointing out that although the system is weak, we have a strong profession, schools that succeed despite tough conditions, and many good examples. But of course there is a much simpler response to the question: “Yes. Welcome to preschool!”

The Swedish preschool system is an international role model. Having time

for each child has an impact that lasts for many years. The OECD reports that it is possible to discern from the results of the PISA test taken at age 15 – nine years after leaving preschool – which pupils had a solid foundation in preschool. We must ensure that all children in preschool actually have access to educational instruction and that preschool is available to all children.

This is why the Government is investing in preschools. Research shows that class size has an impact on educational content. If groups are too large, preschool teachers may choose to exclude themes or working methods. All children must be ‘seen’ and have time for play and for educational challenges. Consequently, the Government is reintroducing class-size targets and is providing government grants to enable authorities responsible for preschools to reduce class sizes.

As in all other school activities, preschool quality is determined by the relationship between children and teachers. Educational leadership is crucial. Preschool teachers



Minister for Education Gustav Fridolin visits a preschool in Sundbyberg, outside of Stockholm.

and preschool heads must be given the opportunity to remain in the profession and develop. The Government is now putting an end to the prevailing counterproductive tradition of preschools being excluded from any school initiatives: preschool teachers can be included in teachers' wage increases; an equivalent to the boost for head teachers has been introduced by the Government for preschool heads; and government grants for the Creative Schools initiative have been expanded to include preschools.

When the impact of preschool education is so evident so many years down the line, of course all children must have access to it. This is why the Government wants all six-year-olds to attend a preschool class where there is scope for play and learning, and where equal value is placed on reading, writing and arithmetic.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the first Preschool Act entering into force. We are highlighting all the efforts being made at preschools to advance the care, development and knowledge of our children. We are seeing how what once were educational visions have become

reality today for hundreds of thousands of children throughout Sweden. We are delighted by the successes that have given so many generations a solid start, and we are continuing to build on the foundation that has been laid. For there is more to be done, there are more visions to be realised. Perhaps we have only come an eighth of the way?

The text up to 2006 in this publication was written by Barbara Martin Korpi, formerly Senior Adviser at the then Ministry of Education. She worked for several decades at the Government Offices on issues concerning preschools and out-of-school centres, and in that way has taken part in most of the efforts described here. She is responsible for the publication's contents.

This edition has been updated by the Ministry of Education and Research to include what has taken place during the period 2006–2014.

Gustav Fridolin  
Minister for Education



## Table of contents

Preface	4	The State Grant - the Instrument for Steering Development	36
The Historical Roots of the Preschool (1850-1930)	10	Costs and municipal growth	36
Child crèches	10	Earmarked state grants	36
Kindergardens	13	The municipal "lump sum"	37
Child Care, is it Needed? (1930-1960)	15	Better Use of Resources (1976-1985)	38
"Bigger Nurseries" (Storbarnkammaren)	15	Change in Government and continuing expansion of child care	38
Woman's place in the home and on the labour market	16	Area standards abolished – greater freedom for municipalities	38
Day care centres or family day care homes?	19	Development and renewal	41
Play schools	19	Private Alternatives? (1980 –1990)	42
Economic boom of the 1960s – the starting point	21	Municipalisation	42
The 1968 Commission on Nursery Provision and the first Preschool Act	23	Private alternatives?	42
A Commission for Modern Childhood	23	Preschool for All Children – but when? (1985-1991)	44
Pedagogical dialogue, work teams, and groups of mixed ages	24	The historic bill	44
Preschool	25	Action group to promote child care	45
The First Preschool Act	25	Preschool and School (1981-1991)	47
The National Board of Health and Welfare - advice and guidelines	26	Age when starting school	47
The youngest children	27	The issue of preschool and school	48
Parental insurance	28	Flexible school start	49
The role of men	31	Leisure-time centres and the school	49
Expansion of the 1970s	33	Change in Government (1991-1994)	50
Two parent providers in family becomes the norm – expansion accelerates	33	Change in Government again	50
Shortage of places despite all efforts	34	A revolution for freedom of choice?	52
		Reverting to earlier situation	53



Child Care Guarantee Incorporated in New Act (1995)	55	Quality in Preschool (2003-2006)	70
The new legislation on child care	55	Raising quality	70
Without unreasonable delay	56	The Preschool Bill	71
Economic Crisis (1990s)	57	Gender equality and multi-culturalism	72
Baby-boom	57	Listening to children's views	72
Economic crisis	57	A final comment	74
Pressure to expand	58	Freedom of establishment and strengthened educational mandate (2006–2014)	75
Economic cutbacks	58	Freedom of establishment and the extended universal preschool	75
Municipal differences	59	New Education Act and revised curriculum	76
From Family Policy to Education Policy (1996-1998)	60	Boost for Preschool	78
Preschool to improve school	60	New preschool teacher education	78
Preschool class	61	Afterword	82
Curriculum for Preschool	62	List of photos	83
Views on the child in the curriculum	64	Tables and figures	84
Maximum Fee and Universal Preschool (1999-2003)	66		
Preschool, but not for everyone	66		
Halve the fee for day care centres!	66		
A controversial reform	68		
Maximum fee and preschool for all children	69		
Evaluation of the National Agency for Education	69		

## The Historical Roots of the Preschool (1850-1930)

### *Child crèches*

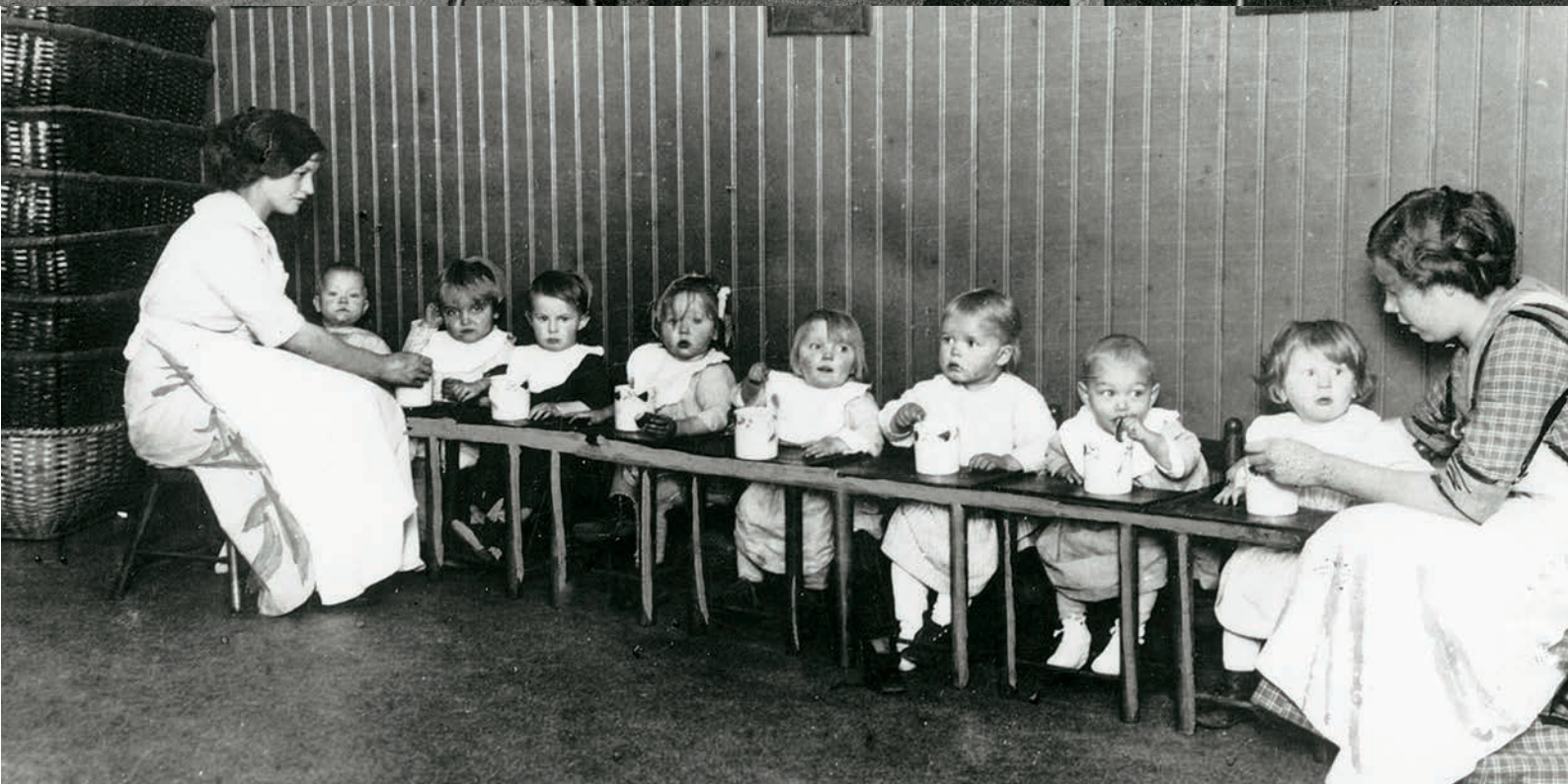
Child care has been provided in Sweden, albeit on a modest scale, since the middle of the 19th-century. As people moved from the countryside into towns looking for work, different social institutions for children began to emerge. The wages of factory workers were low, both the man and his wife, and also the older children had to work to support the family and many women were single mothers who had to take care of their children on their own.

Most children in the towns grew up together with other children from the neighbourhood on streets and in backyards. Many small children had no adult to take care of them whilst their parents were working, instead they were taken care of by an older brother or sister or the wife of a relative or neighbour. To improve this situation, child crèches were started for the children of poor working mothers. Some of the worst off children got places in the child crèches. Access was based on needs and a certificate was required from poor relief. The first crèche was opened in 1854 in Kungsholmen

in Stockholm. Since then it has been run without interruption, and more recently as a traditional preschool. The crèches were associated with poverty far into the 1950s.

They were open from seven in the morning until seven in the evening. And if needed, children could also be taken care of at night. The interior was spartan, they had large groups and the staff often had no training, but the children were kept clean and had three square meals a day. After the general strike of 1909, a number of infant crèches were opened, as many fathers had lost their jobs and mothers had to bear the main burden of supporting the family. For a poor person or single mother, a place at a crèche would mean that she would not have to leave her child at a foster home.

Child crèches were run by foundations and the churches. They were financed through donations, philanthropy and collections in the local church. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were around 250 foundations and charities for children. These charities for the poor were subsequently criticised by the labour movement on the grounds that it should be the responsibility of society to provide help for those who needed it.





Pictures on preceding page.  
Upper , Katarina child  
crèche in Söder in Stock-  
holm 1906.

Lower , Engelbrekt's child  
crèche in Stockholm 1909.

Left, Child crèche in Stock-  
holm in the 1930s.

## *Kindergardens*

During this period a completely different approach reached Sweden from Germany. These were kindergardens or what came to be known in Swedish as "barntädgården". Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) coined the term to reflect his pedagogical philosophy that children were like plants to be taken care of and nurtured in well adapted environments. Despite the fact that the idea of the kindergarden reached many countries at an early stage, in the beginning it only received little attention.

The kindergardens were only open three to four hours a day and were run for purely pedagogical purposes, often by private persons. The fees were self-financing, and the children came from affluent, well-educated families. The kindergarden was intended to support upbringing at home, and this was the reason children were only there a few hours a day. Some of the basic ideas, still valid in modern preschool pedagogy, were related to the importance of play in the child's development, and that children must be able to work with different things, build and explore and in this way learn from their own personal experiences. Fröbel developed materials, games and songs for children, and by many he is regarded as the father of the Swedish preschool.

Those working in the kindergardens were liberal, radical women. They wanted to contribute to a better society by giving children a rich and stimulating childhood. In having this aim, they were sharing in a tradition dating back to the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, a tradition which still continues up to the present time. Their philosophical ideas originated from Jean Henri Rousseau and romantic idealism – the child is a product of nature and contains the seeds for becoming a complete human being.

The first public kindergarden in Sweden was established in 1904 by the two well-known sisters, Ellen and Maria Moberg, working at the "Fröbel" Training College in Norrköping, which they started. These public kindergardens were intended for all children, including those of workers, either for a low fee or completely free. One aim was to counteract the growing gaps in society, and create greater harmony between different social classes.

In photographs from this period, we can see children gathered in large groups around a table, wearing institutional clothes, and closely shaven heads to prevent lice, and bowls of gruel in front of them, or lining up around bath tubs waiting to wash themselves, under



the supervision of uniformed nurses. Other pictures show well-dressed children in seaman's hats, equipped with handy little wheel-barrows, rakes and spades together with their very elegant female teachers.

Child crèches and kindergardens were the precursors of the day care centres and play schools to come later. The Swedish preschool emerged from these two strands of poor relief and pedagogical philosophy. It would take a long time before these historical roots would grow together.

Child Care, is it Needed? (1930-1960)

*"Bigger Nurseries" (Storbarnkammaren)*

One of the main ingredients of the history of the Swedish preschool is the lengthy period over which debates were held on the merits of public child care - its advantages and disadvantages, how and why - and society's responsibility for its provision. This part of its history also very much parallels that of women.

The debate over the Swedish preschool

Left, Children in a kindergarden with their teachers.

Right, The two sisters, Ellen and Maria Moberg.



started in earnest in 1932. It was then that Alva Myrdal (1902-1986, well-known Social Democratic politician, debater, activist for women's rights, disarmament expert with international assignments ), coined the term "the bigger nursery" (storbarnkammare). The children of working mothers could be there whilst their mothers were working, at night also if necessary, and other children could spend a few hours a day there. Alva Myrdal wanted to remove the stigma of poverty from child crèches. They should be of high quality and the staff well-educated. She considered that the upbringing of small children was excessively authoritarian, both in the home, in the kindergardens, and in child crèches. "The bigger nursery" would be an oasis for children in an urban environment that was basically unfriendly for children. Child care should be provided for everyone, and children from all social classes should have the same opportunities for development. It should also be free of charge. She also believed that the municipalities should get a state grant to run them, and that the state should be responsible for the training of the staff.

Alva Myrdal's proposals and contributions to the debate had an impact on development. In Stockholm, HSB (national housing

co-operative) opened its own nurseries so that working mothers could get good and safe care for their children. They also started their own Preschool Training College (Soci-alpedagogiska seminariet), the initiative was taken by Alva Myrdal who also became its principal for 11 years. In the first instance, the college would cover the need for trained staff at the 13 HSB child nurseries in Stockholm and those that were being planned. But the idea of a "bigger nursery" for children in each housing area was still far ahead of its time.

#### *Woman's place in the home and on the labour market*

The first state commission into child care in Sweden was carried out in 1938 by the Population Commission which introduced the new terms "day care centre" for whole day care, and play schools for shorter periods during the day. The investigators recommended that the ideal form of care was the child's own home combined with play school. The day care centre was necessary to satisfy the needs of the labour force for women, but it was not really desirable.

But the views of women and mothers turned out to be very sensitive to the state of the economy. During the Second World War,





A kindergarden in Södertälje 1938.

women became more important as a part of the labour force, and not just through their roles as mothers and housewives. Swedish men were called up for military service and women went out into working life, and took over the man's role in production. The birth rate was low during the early years of the decade. The population crisis and the need for women on the labour market necessitated reforms in family policy.

The Population Commission was set up in 1941 under the leadership of Tage Erlander (Social Democratic Prime Minister 1946-1969). The Commission put forward proposals on grants and regulation of day care centres and play schools, and these were quickly processed by the Riksdag. The debate on day care centres was heated and lively, but the proposal was adopted by the Riksdag. The first state operating grant was introduced in 1944. The Training College also received a state grant and the number of training places was increased. The National Board of Health and Welfare was given primary responsibility for child care and its expansion.

But after the war, it was as if the new attitudes concerning women's employment and the importance of the day care centre from the time before the war had never existed. The birth rate increased rapidly, in 1945

136,000 children were born in contrast to what was normal in Sweden, a yearly figure of around 100,000 children. The woman's place was at home and that was what she should go back to. During many lively debates in the Riksdag, the day care centre was fundamentally questioned. They were too expensive and required too many staff. And, what's more, was the day care centre really good for children? Most men considered, quite independently of their party sympathies, that women should stay at home and take care of children now that men were back at work. The 1950s are usually regarded, above all, as the decade of the Swedish housewife.

Middle-aged and older men in the Government and the Riksdag had long been opposed to women working outside the home. The differences were more pronounced within the parties than between them. Many women in the same assemblies fought to oppose this view. However, the predominant view of the establishment far into the 60s was that mothers should stay at home with their children. More than a division along party ideological lines, it was a gender and generational issue. A dramatic change was imminent.

### *Day care centres or family day care homes?*

It was not only the members of the Riksdag who were opposed to day care centres. At the National Board of Health and Welfare, the day care centre was mainly regarded as a support facility to help families with problems and the risks associated with women with small children working outside the home were pointed out. The board fought a battle arguing that children who had been removed from their family should receive care in a foster home instead of at an institution, and the day care centres came to be regarded as equivalent to an orphanage. On the other hand, family day care homes or foster day care homes, as they were earlier called, were highly recommended. Here the atmosphere was more like that at home with the "good" mother in attendance. Day care centre or family day care home, this became one of the most widely debated issues over a long period.

For the Woman's Council in the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), day care centres were a major issue throughout the 50s. Many groups in society needed to be convinced, not least the male members of LO, whose attitudes were completely different; We should have salaries where we can

support our women and give them a decent life. Our children should not need to be at an institution.

The Government's bill to the Riksdag in 1949 contained proposals for investing in day care centres. But the Riksdag had a different view. Family day care homes should be expanded and child care, in the first instance, would be provided as a social resource for single mothers. However, expansion was slow, in 1960 there were around 10,000 places in day care centres, just 500 more than had existed 10 years earlier. And there were just as many places in family day care homes.

### *Play schools*

In contrast to day care homes, play schools were never questioned. A few hours a day of pedagogical activities was generally considered to be good for the child's development and upbringing. The municipalities also preferred to invest in play schools as they were cheaper. In 1948, 10 per cent of 4-7 year-olds had a place in play school in Stockholm, and 4.5 per cent of 0-7 year olds a place in day care centres. 80 per cent of day care children came from the lowest social groups. In the 1950s, play schools were continuously expanded and the number of children increased from 19,000 to 28,000.



Toddlers and child nurses at a day care centre 1967.

*Economic boom of the 1960s – the starting point*

Typical of the 1960s in Sweden was a growing economy which soon led to an acute need for a growing labour force. New housing areas grew up around large cities. Labour was recruited from other countries, mainly from Yugoslavia, Greece and Finland. But Swedish women nevertheless formed a large pool of labour, they had increasingly acquired an education, and increasing numbers wanted to work professionally. Women's demands for liberation now became the hub of a growing democratisation process, women were demanding gender equality, participation in working life and society on equal conditions, and they wanted to contribute to supporting the family and have their own professional life outside the home. In no small part, they were assisted by a booming economy – since women were necessary on the labour market.

This in its turn highlighted the need for child care, and put pressure on its organisation and development. Separate taxation was introduced, the basis for women to be self-supporting, and now the real expansion of child care started. During the decade, the number of places in day care centres and family day care homes increased from 20,000

to 60,000 places, and they were equally distributed between both types. In 1963 parental insurance was extended, from three to six months, at that time it was called the maternity allowance.

When the 1960s were over, Sweden had taken the lead in Europe in developing a new family policy. The expansion in child care and parental insurance became the consistent strategy of the Social Democrats in family policy over the coming decades. The Left party and the Liberal party contributed to wide-ranging cross-party agreement in the Riksdag.

Undoubtedly, it was the young Prime Minister, Olof Palme (Social Democratic Prime Minister 1969-1976 and 1982-1986), a radical and equality oriented new generation of politician in the Government, who seized the initiative and was the driving force behind the building up of society which had been initiated, and for which child care formed an important foundation stone.



The Palme family at their home in Vällingby 1969.

The 1968 Commission on Nursery Provision and the first Preschool Act

### *A Commission for Modern Childhood*

During a period of left-wing movements, student revolts, occupation of campuses and growing demands from parents for day care centres; the Commission on nursery provision (Barnstugeutredning) was appointed in 1968. According to its directives, work would mainly focus on the pedagogical contents of child nurseries, general activities for children aged 5-6 with handicaps. But the scope of the Commission expanded, the initial directives were supplemented the following year to include drawing up guidelines for municipal planning on child care, and the submission of proposals on how nurseries at an early stage could be part of town and physical planning. In 1970 the commission received further directives to examine education issues.

What did the day care centres look like at the time of Commission on nursery provision? They were managed in an authoritarian way with staff hierarchies, and the children were divided into various groupings - infants, toddlers, intermediate and older children - based on the development psy-

chology ruling at that time where a child's development was considered to proceed along definite stages. Food, rest, hygiene, and outdoor activities were all considered to be important. Getting a place in a day care centre was still very much based on needs assessment, many children had single mothers. The romantic spirit of Fröbel still remained in the play schools catering for children at home aged 5-6, often with elements of traditional handicrafts – sewing, cross-stitching, churning butter, spinning wool and working with wood handicrafts. The prevailing view then was that children start to become social beings at the age of four. The day care centre was still regarded by many as something of a necessary evil.

A gigantic commission based on around 1000 pages of documents was the foundation, ideologically, pedagogically and organisationally for the full-scale expansion of child care in the municipalities. The commission mobilised expertise from every corner of the country to assist them in their work. The scientific foundation was based on Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) development psychology and Erik Homburger Eriksson's research in social psychology into the growing child. Work teams, children in mixed age groups, integration and normalisation of children

with functional disabilities, pedagogical dialogue, theme work, the importance of play, design of the premises, pedagogical material and co-operation with parents - all these areas were highlighted in the commission. The aim of this was to bring about a powerful democratisation of activities for children, and introduce a progressive pedagogy for creating equivalent conditions for growing up.

*Pedagogical dialogue, work teams, and groups of mixed ages*

The pedagogical dialogue recommended by the investigators aimed at developing a two-way relationship between active pedagogues and children, based on respect for the child, and treating the child as an individual, and having a belief in the child's ability, curiosity and desire to learn. The inspiration for the pedagogical dialogue came from the Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire's work on illiteracy amongst the poor peasants of Latin America. Care in the preschool would be integrated with pedagogical activities. Very small children were also encouraged to participate in and influence their daily surroundings, and in this way they would get the opportunity of developing their social competence in democratic processes. Pedagogical work would be organised around themes, not

subjects, based on the child's own revealed interests, the environment should provide opportunities for individual activity, creativity and play. The Commission on nursery provision broke radically, not only with the existing pedagogical traditions of the school, but also with the nursery's traditional attitude to the child's own maturation processes.

One of the proposals of the Commission was that staff form work teams and through their co-operation should provide a democratic model for children to emulate. In this way, the intention was to break the earlier distribution of work, where child minders often functioned as subordinate assistants to the preschool teacher. The underlying idea of a work team was also very much in the spirit of the times where the necessity for leadership was questioned. Did the day care centres need a head? Couldn't decisions be made collectively? The work team remained and was further developed in the preschool and functioned as one of the foundations of the pedagogical approach. However, no serious attempt was made to replace the role of the responsible head.

Another proposal that was accepted was having groups with children of mixed ages i.e. groups for small children up to the age of three, and what were called "sibling" groups



for the older children. Here the aim was that children could make friends with others irrespective of their age, the older children would be models for the younger ones, and help them in daily chores and situations, and that no evaluative comparisons would be made between children's performance. Children should learn to co-operate, not compete. Children with physical, psychological or social handicaps could more easily be part of the regular groups of children when these groups were not based on age. This view was the start of a new epoch of democracy, gender equality and solidarity that would be influential and be put into practice in the daily upbringing of children. The ideals of the Commission had by this time become of major importance for the overall development of the preschool.

### *Preschool*

The ambition of the Commission was to bring together the traditions from day care centres and play schools under a common organisation to be known as the "preschool". Organisationally, it could be run as a full-time or part-time preschool, but the only distinguishing factor between these two forms was the time at which activities were provided during the day, and not their peda-

gogical content. The preschool was intended for all children, including children with different types of functional disabilities, many of whom had earlier been obliged to stay in special institutions.

The role of family day care homes was also examined by the Commission which regarded them mainly as a complement during the expansion of the preschool. Private day care mothers were still very much in the majority, but more and more municipalities had started to municipalise family day care homes.

In accordance with its directives, the Commission also determined its views on the need for expansion, how the need for places could be assessed, municipal planning, and a universal preschool.

### *The First Preschool Act*

The Commission's report was positively received in 1972 by Prime Minister, Olof Palme, himself the father of small children. Now the time was ripe for the major preschool reform. Its starting point was that it was the responsibility of society to create conditions for all parents, and enable them to combine family life with work.

Preschooling for families with children should provide at reasonable cost activities

of pedagogical quality that would cater for the child's upbringing and well-being. The preschool should also support children with physical, mental or psychosocial problems and equalise differences in conditions for growing up.

The first piece of legislation in the area – The Preschool Act, which came into force in 1975, led to preschooling for six-year-olds, 525 hours a year free of charge, planned expansion of preschooling in each municipality for children of parents who were either working or studying, and priority places for children in need of special support, as well as outreach activities. The preschool could be run in the form of a day care centre or part-time group, but the overall term "preschooling" also covered family day care homes.

As a result of the Act, preschooling became a mandatory municipal task, where municipalities were obliged to take responsibility for its expansion as laid down in the plan. A couple of decades later on, it was in principle the contents of the first Preschool Act, i.e. the Act on expansion that came to apply. In 1995 it was replaced by broader and more detailed legislation on the obligation of the municipalities, not as before to expand, but in fact to provide places without unreasonable delay.

### *The National Board of Health and Welfare - advice and guidelines*

The National Board of Health and Welfare played the dominant role in implementing the new ideas of the Commission on nursery provision concerning pedagogical dialogue, work teams and groups of children of mixed ages through their own progressive consultants in the country. The Government commissioned the start up of comprehensive pilot studies. Everyone working in the preschool received 40 hours of in-service training, and a whole range of information material including work plans was drawn up. Radical changes in major parts of the system, organisationally, ideologically and pedagogically was not an entirely pain-free process, and, of course it had to be done quickly. Consultants from the National Board of Health and Welfare hardly had any time to use their own pedagogical dialogue approach. After a short period of time, the generational and cultural shift became obvious, and this led to opposition and discussions.

In order to realise the reform of the preschool, it was also decided to reform preschool teacher training. Teacher training which since 1962 had been provided by the Preschool Teacher Training College was transferred to the higher education sector

(university level), and extended from four to five terms, with changes in both form and content. The number of teacher training places was increased during the 70s from approx. 2,000 per annual cohort to close to 5,000.

The National Board of Health and Welfare issued detailed advice and guidelines, and produced architectural drawings of nurseries, and how they should be designed and equipped. The premises were given great attention. Each department in a day care centre was carefully measured so that the number of places to be provided through state grants could be determined. A standard area of 9.5 square metres per place was centrally determined.

There was still uncertainty as to what impact all this activity would have on children's development. International experiences or comparisons hardly existed at the time, nor was there any research to speak of. As a result quality recommendations were cautious. The groups should consist of 10-12 children in the groups for small children with two adults for every five children, and 15 children in the "siblings" group of mixed ages with one adult for every five children. In this context, the National Board of Health and Welfare differed from the Commission

on nursery provision (Barnstugeutredning), which considered that groups consisting of 20 children created better opportunities for working flexibly with larger or smaller groups of children of the same and different ages. The introductory stage for acclimating children to the preschool should be given more time. The guidelines for co-operation with parents were ambitious. The municipalities were willing to listen, this was still a new activity for them. Advice and instructions – and there were many, were gratefully received and followed to the letter.

Even though the advice given by the National Board of Health and Welfare came to be criticised as excessive and over-detailed, it is nevertheless a fact that basic quality was high, even and equivalent throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas. Undoubtedly, the outcome was the result of a clear regulatory system at the national level in the early years of the build-up.

### *The youngest children*

The 1970s was the decade of commissions. In the traditional Swedish manner, the issues were carefully examined, circulated for official comment and support was built up for decisions and reforms. In addition, the

Commission on nursery provision covered a number of issues concerning leisure-time centres, immigrant children, coordination between preschool and school, children with handicaps, parental training and outreach recruitment.

The Commission into family support (Familjestödsutredningen) was appointed in 1974 to investigate the pedagogical conditions for the youngest children in day care centres. By virtue of their own research and that of others, the Commission was able to demonstrate that small children can have close relationships with people other than their mother, and that primary relationships with their parents were maintained even though the child was in a day care centre. The importance to children of their fathers was highlighted in a new and radical way. Small children also form social contacts with each other, and benefit from being together with other children. The Commission emphasised the importance of high quality in preschooling for the youngest children, the importance of preparatory acclimatisation with parental involvement, and sharing responsibility in the day care centre. The Commission wanted groups of children of mixed ages to cover the whole preschool age range. Parental co-operatives were promoted as an alternative form.

Even though research in the area was insufficient, in the view of the Commission experiences showed that a good day care centre with trained staff cooperating with parents, planning their pedagogical activities, and relating meaningful activities to reality provides a good environment for children to grow up in and a good complement to the home.

### *Parental insurance*

Another issue which the Commission on family support was asked to investigate concerned parental insurance. This reform in family policy, unique in international terms, would also be rapidly expanded in stages.

Three months of general maternity allowance were introduced in 1955. In 1963 this was extended to six months, and in 1975 to nine months, at which time it was transformed into parental insurance which fathers could also use. As a result of the proposals from the Commission on family support, parental insurance was extended in 1978 to cover twelve months – nine months with parental allowances, the same as for sickness benefit, and then a further three months with the same guaranteed amount for everyone. Parental insurance could also be used to reduce working hours during the child's



Helping in everyday work,  
1978



"Hoa-Hoa" and his baby, poster on parental insurance 1976.

early years at school and during this period provides the right to work 75 per cent of normal working hours. Generous rules for the care of sick children were also introduced under the parental insurance scheme. Parental insurance has been maintained in this form and expanded over the years to today's current figure of 480 days.

### *The role of men*

Parental insurance, an issue for many decades, became as it was extended together with a preschool of high quality, the Social Democrats' and the Left Party's alternative to the Centre-Right's child care allowance. The principle that both mothers and fathers should be able to use the days under parental insurance, and that it could be used to decrease their working hours without any loss of income whilst their children were small, is, however, based on a completely different ideological foundation than the child care allowance, which is mainly intended for a parent staying at home who is supported by the other parent.

The man's role in the family was also part of the debate on gender equality during the 1970s. In traditional male dominated workplaces, this was viewed with some degree of mistrust since men were also expected to

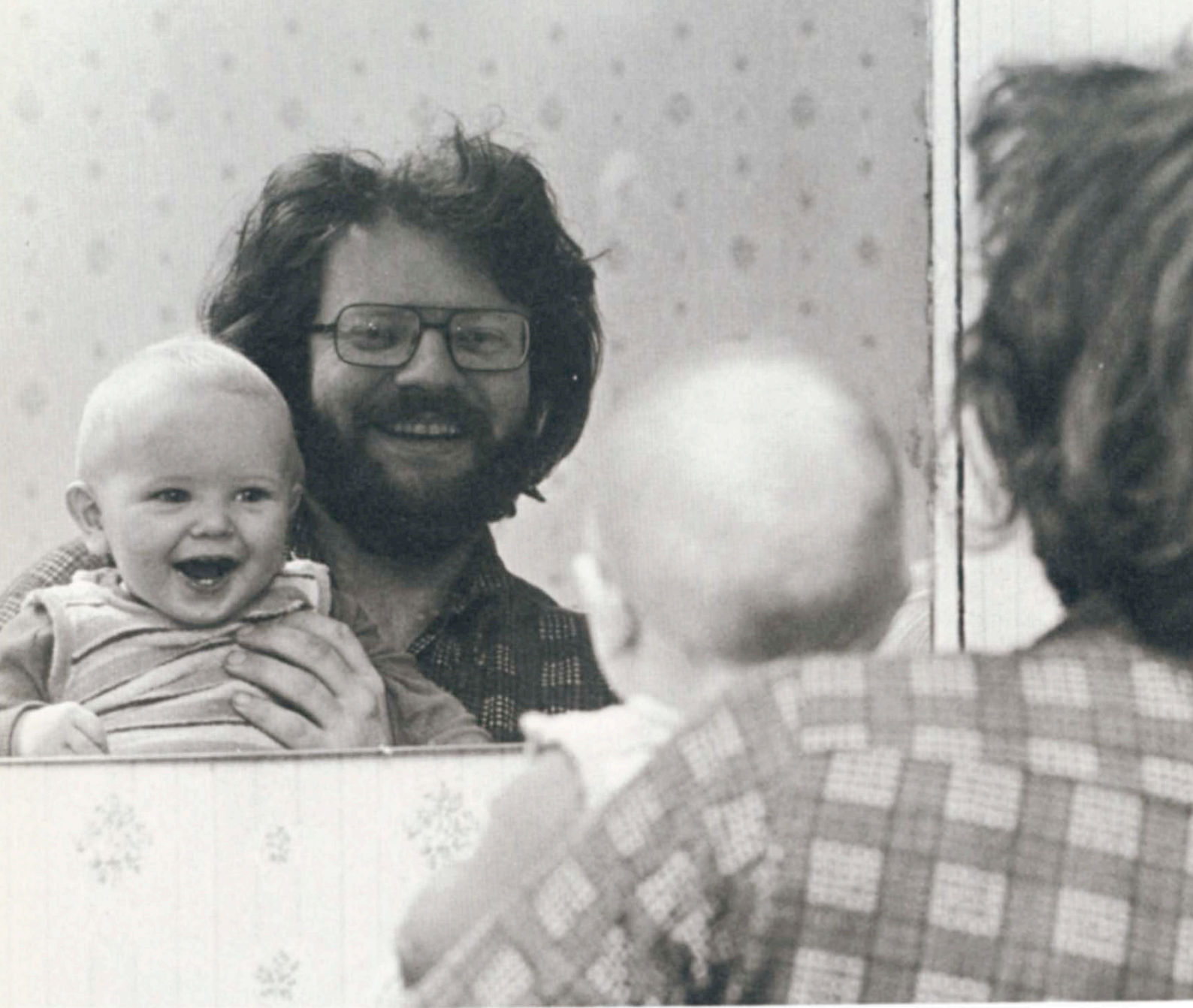
share in the work at home, as well as take care of the children. A very small proportion of parental insurance was used by a very small proportion of fathers in the early stages. Various studies showed that men hardly took part in the work of running a home, but they did devote somewhat more time to their children.

In his speech on equality for women, at the Social Democratic Party Congress in 1972, Olof Palme says;

*- Even if we build countless day care centres and the finest housing environments, we will still not liberate women, if the work at home is not divided between men and women in a more sensible way than hitherto, and if attitudes determining what are male and female tasks are not changed.*

In 1975 fathers used three per cent of their days under the parental insurance scheme, in 1992 the figure was slightly less than 10 per cent, and in 2004 men still only used 19 per cent of these days.

The first "daddy" month was introduced in 1994 by the Minister for Health and Social Affairs from the Liberal party, Bengt Westerberg, and the second month in 2002 by the Minister for Health and Social Affairs from the Social Democratic party, Ingela Thalén.



Father and child 1978.



## Expansion of the 1970s

*Two parent providers in family becomes the norm – expansion accelerates*

The number of working mothers was increasing far more quickly than there were places in child care. In 1970 close to half of all mothers of small children were working, but the proportion with a place in child care was less than nine per cent. 10 years later, 70 per cent were working and still barely more than 30 per cent of children had a place in municipal child care. Families with two working parents had rapidly become the norm – a transformation in society without precedent. The parents of the '68 generation were the driving force behind the expansion of day care centres. Marches for day care centres were commonplace on the streets and in the squares.

Although there was a major shortage of places in day care centres and parental insurance still only covered six months, the Government continued to maintain a policy based on these two components. The expansion of child care became the increasingly dominant task of family policy over the next 20 years, this was how long it would take before the goal of full coverage could be said to have been achieved.

By means of an agreement in 1976 between the Government and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities, a programme was decided on to expand child care over the next five-year period, comprising around 100,000 new day care centre places, 50,000 new places in leisure-time centres and an expansion of family day care homes. A new inflation-proof state grant at a much higher level was introduced in the form of a start-up grant, and an operating grant based on the number of places. The financing of state costs was achieved through a special levy on employers.

The municipalities built an unending number of day care centres. But the more they built, the longer the queues became. The need seemed to be insatiable. Given the lack of land for building, flats were used for day care centres, and parental cooperatives were started by enterprising parents since there were not enough municipal day care centres. During the decade the number of children in day care centres increased from 33,000 to 135,000, and the number of children in family day care homes from 32,000 to 125,000. In Stockholm, one preschool a week was opened, and the city had an option on all vacant flats on the ground floor of apartment blocks which they could inspect

to see if they might be suitable as premises for day care centres.

### *Shortage of places despite all efforts*

Despite the expansion of child care places in the first decade, child care was still far from being regarded as a right - getting a place in a day care centre was regarded as more of a privilege. The municipalities used different queuing systems to achieve some kind of order and fairness in the distribution of places, but the basic problem remained that needs were growing far more quickly than supply. Priority was given to those in greatest need - children in need of special support had a legal right to be given priority, single parents and those working in occupations where there was a shortage of manpower could also be given priority, but otherwise the instrument for regulating distribution was the queue, and waiting periods could be years.

Who would take care of the children who couldn't get places? It was mainly in the informal child care sector, primarily private day care mothers who in the absence of other alternatives provided a large part of child care during this period. Day care mothers working on the "black market", were gradually disappearing, they were employed by the municipality, got training, received

salaries, paid taxes and the "child minder" became established as a legitimate occupation. Relatives, neighbours and temporary babysitters were all used to help manage the shortage. Grandparents were a resource, but distances could be long and soon the older generation of women would be at work - grandmothers as a resource for child care would gradually disappear from the statistics. Municipalities and employers increasingly focused on providing overnight care. Children slept in hospital utility rooms at nights whilst the mother was on night duty, and in the backseat of the car children were fast asleep whilst parents took it in turns to relieve each other on nightshifts.

The question of where day care centres should be located, at the workplace or in housing areas, was decided by the Commission on nursery provision. The recommended location was close proximity to the home, where the day care centre would be a natural part of the housing neighbourhood. Some workplaces, however, provided special day care facilities for their employees. A number of larger hospitals provided day care centres open at night for their staff. These special solutions were gradually disappearing since the supply of municipal day care was starting to increase.

Parents and children out demonstrating for day care centres and leisure-time centres 1975.



## The State Grant - the Instrument for Steering Development

### *Costs and municipal growth*

A strong driving force in the municipal expansion of child care especially in the initial phases, was its close relationship to municipal growth and increasing tax revenues. The arguments for attracting people and companies to specific municipalities were now not just good living conditions, schools and outdoor life, but also easily accessible child care of high quality. Soon there was not a single new housing area planned without premises for child care.

The other driving force, not only for the expansion of preschooling, but also its qualitative development during the early decades was the existence of stable financing conditions. The state's share of preschool costs was initially relatively small. In the 1970s, when the decision on fully expanding the system had been taken, the state grant was raised substantially to about 45 per cent of operating costs. The municipalities' share was approximately the same, and parents accounted for about 10 per cent of costs. This distribution of costs between the state, municipalities and users remained essentially

the same up to 1992 when the state grant to the municipalities was radically changed from a specific earmarked grant to a general state equalisation grant. During the period 1975-1990, total costs of child care increased from SEK 2.9 billion to SEK 35 billion. No other sector of society could come close to matching the expansion of child care. Needless to say this led to some tension between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

### *Earmarked state grants*

State grants were earmarked, related to performance, and had no cost ceiling, they were calculated annually - and exceeded. The grants were distributed by the National Board of Health and Welfare to the municipalities based on reports on number of places as measured during the previous year. During the early years of the expansion, the grant was linked to the requirement for pedagogically trained staff, nutritional food, area per child, maximum number of children in groups and opening hours. These were important factors in determining the equivalence of basic quality in the expansion of preschooling in a situation where municipalities had far from perfect knowledge of the situation.

The needs of the municipalities to maximise their incomes meant that the smallest change in the rules governing state grants had an immediate impact. This was widely used throughout the period. It later became necessary to simplify the administration of grants. The National Board of Health and Welfare was hardly in a position to approve every day care centre given the speed at which they were being built. More and more rules and checks were abolished, as municipal autonomy increased. The state grant, however, would also in the future be used as a instrument to steer the municipal development of child care in a certain direction; in 1977 the first grant for mother tongue tuition in the preschool was introduced, a simplified unit grant for every 15 registered children was introduced in 1988, as well as a standard grant for children in need of special support, and a special grant for in-service training.

When it turned out that children of blue collar workers were underrepresented in day care centres, mainly because opening hours were not adapted to their needs, an additional operating grant was quickly allocated to day care centres open at night. Later on day care centres open for at least three hours above the norm 6.30-18.00, or open for at

least seven hours every Saturday and Sunday were entitled to an additional grant.

Such detailed steering through state grants may seem unthinkable today, but the effects of this steering were indisputable. When earmarked state grants for child care were discontinued at the beginning of the 1990s, regulation by law was used instead and made much more rigorous.

### *The municipal "lump sum"*

In December 1991, the Commission on municipal finances put forward a long discussed proposal on a radical change in state grants to municipalities. The earlier earmarked state grants for school, child care, and other municipal activities were replaced by a general grant, and in addition to this, a system for equalising incomes and costs between municipalities was introduced. This meant that a large number of earmarked state grants were discontinued and what was called the "municipal lump sum" was introduced - the whole state grant would be distributed as a lump sum without any special conditions governing its use. The municipalities could now, based on existing legislation, themselves determine how they would use funds in accordance with their own priorities. Municipal self-determination has increased substanti-

ally since these reforms were introduced in 1993.

When the economy started to grow again at the turn of year 2000, some earmarked grants were introduced in both the preschool and school. Special state grants were introduced for quality assurance and staff increases. The Association of Swedish Local Authorities found it difficult to accept this change. But the state grant is now used once again as a steering instrument to guide development.

## Better Use of Resources (1976-1985)

### *Change in Government and continuing expansion of child care*

In autumn 1976, a Centre-Right Government took power for the first time in 40 years. The change in Government did not lead to any major changes in child care. The expansion continued, even though some changes were made to the state grant. The statutory universal preschool for six-year-olds had now been introduced, and there was an agreement between the state and municipalities that the state grant should not be withdrawn. To receive operating grants, day care centres were required to be open at

least seven hours a day compared with the earlier five hours a day. The five hour limit had led to the establishment of increasing numbers of day care centres open half-time. These were run with full operating grants, which covered most of the costs. In the same year the first grant for mother tongue tuition was introduced for six-year-olds.

No child care allowance was proposed by the Centre-Right Government. The importance of home for child care and upbringing was emphasised in public statements. Training for parents was developed and linked to the child welfare centres.

The National Board of Health and Welfare continued to play an intensive role. A broadly-based approach had been initiated focusing on a pedagogical programme for the preschool.

### *Area standards abolished – greater freedom for municipalities*

The Social Democrats returned to Government in 1982. In the child care area, the time in opposition had been spent on establishing and running a child and youth

Groups of children of mixed ages 1978.



delegation under the leadership of the party chairman, Olof Palme, and this issued recommendations calling for the expansion and development of pedagogical content in the preschool.

The cost of expanding child care increased immensely. And yet the queues were still not decreasing. The regulatory system drawn up by the National Board of Health and Welfare began to create tension with the municipalities. Was it really necessary that such inflexible and rigid standards for areas and all the other rules had to be followed? All these regulations led to excessive cost increases. The economy had started to weaken. The Government needed to achieve growth, combat inflation and reduce the budget deficit. Better use of resources in child care became a requirement, both for economic reasons and also to speed up its expansion. Some new measures were taken.

The earlier generous rules for state grants were tightened somewhat and further small changes were made. It was no longer possible to obtain a grant for unused places, grants were now tied to the number of registered children instead of a specific number of places, the slack in the system was removed.

These restraints were accompanied by a decision providing greater freedom for

municipalities. The National Board of Health and Welfare would no longer provide detailed advice and guidelines for child care. The standards on areas laid down centrally - so irritating for the municipalities - were abolished, as was the ceiling on the maximum number of children per department. This clearly meant that the municipalities were to decide themselves how many children there should be in each day care department. The bill was full of statements that the removal of certain state rules would not be permitted to lead to a qualitative deterioration of the preschool, and that municipalities had to make their own local assessments of the need for resources. Discussions on the abolition of area standards and the limits to group size continued into the next century.

In 1984 a staff grant was also introduced for all employees working with groups of children. Basically, the grant corresponded to 25 per cent of salary costs, and it was not as earlier only linked to preschool teaching positions. This was not entirely uncontroversial, particularly from the trade unions representing preschool teachers. This meant that all staff were now entitled to state grants, and this also covered child minders.





### *Development and renewal*

Finally a substantial amount was allocated for development and renewal in child care. Funds amounting to SEK 30 million a year were incorporated into the existing state grant for this purpose, and they would be allocated by the Government on application from the municipalities.

What were the renewal ambitions? Projects aiming at greater efficiency and rationalisation were to be given priority. New cheaper operating models, more differentiated opening hours based on need, decentralisation of budgetary responsibility to the preschools themselves, and municipal result units were set up, as were more effective and rapid admissions rules and allocation of places – even the use of computerised systems.

What were the outcomes? Some of this was achieved, as well as projects on what the preschools were already good at; development of pedagogical content, projects for children in need of special support, cultural projects involving music, drama and creative activities. What primarily came out of all this was renewed involvement and goodwill in the municipalities, amongst politicians, officials

Prime Minister Olof Palme 1985.

and staff in child care. In each municipality, development was underway with funds from the special grant. Child care was at the top of the political agenda of the municipalities. They wanted to show they were progressive and taking many initiatives. Wherever the Minister for Health and Social Affairs went, municipalities and preschools were enthusiastically demonstrating their achievements. Although funding had been brought into the existing state grant, the initiative was experienced as highly positive and revitalising for the whole area. After some years, the National Board of Health and Welfare took over the responsibility for administering the grant, the purpose was that development and renewal should be a regular feature of preschooling and school-age child care.

#### Private Alternatives? (1980 –1990)

##### *Municipalisation*

In the beginning child care was provided entirely through private initiatives with variable quality, but gradually over time it became recognized as a responsibility for society. The state and municipalities undertook to provide an increasingly larger proportion of the financing, day care centres and play

schools gradually came under the auspices of the municipalities. Municipalisation of nurseries received strong support from the municipalities themselves and the trade union organisations. The need for coherent municipal planning was the main reason behind the municipalisation process, as well as more even and higher quality combined with more secure financing. The staff wanted municipalisation in order to get more secure working conditions.

In 1941 the municipalities ran around seven per cent of the few institutions existing at that time, ten years later the municipalities accounted for 36 per cent of what was still a modest number in the country. By the end of the 1960s, the expansion of day care centres under the municipalities had clearly started. In 1970 almost all preschooling - 96 per cent - was municipal.

##### *Private alternatives?*

In the 1980s the non-socialist parties highlighted the question of private alternatives in municipal child care. The costs of child care were increasing and it was thought that private alternatives might be both cheaper and better. Child care was the fastest growing activity in the country - and because of this of great interest for the private sector as

well. Companies started day care centres for their employees – however, in the form of parental co-operatives, in order to receive state grants.

The Government now had to consider all proposals on allowing other providers to enter the area. Lively discussions took place between the party blocks on the left and the right. The Social Democratic Government was cool in its attitude to privatisation and economic exploitation of expansion in child care. There was a fear that there would be different categories of day care centres with both low and high price variants if child care were to become market oriented.

In 1983 the Social Democratic Government put forward a Bill that the grant should not go to day care centres which were run along commercial lines. Strict guidelines were laid down for what types of non-municipal day care centres were entitled to grants.

The state grant would be available to parental co-operatives, privately run day care centres and leisure-time centres offering a special pedagogical form – e.g. Montessori or Waldorf, or run by non-commercial organisations

Learning from each other 1978.



or on other non-commercial grounds. A prerequisite, however, was that that municipalities had to give their approval and it had to be incorporated in their planning of child care, and also that the fees should not be higher than in the municipality, and that children from the municipal queues would be accepted. The intention was that these alternatives could function as a complement to those of the municipality, and be run in a way that would be enriching through the development of new ideas and innovation. On the other hand, they should not have a segregational impact through the fees charged and admission rules, and the operating forms should not be principally based on profitability factors. The municipalities would themselves be responsible for granting permits.

The issue of "freedom to establish" led to many debates in the Riksdag between the Government and the opposition. The Ministry of Finance, recognised internally that a wider circle of providers would be desirable. And this was also the case when in 1990 the Government in a bill accepted that the state grant could also be allocated to day care centres and leisure-time centres run by staff, providing the conditions were the same as for other non-municipal providers.

When the four party Centre-Right Go-

vernment came to power in 1991, private alternatives in child care became a major issue and a new direction was taken.

Preschool for All Children – but when?  
(1985-1991)

### *The historic bill*

The expansion of child care to provide full coverage for children of parents, either working or studying, was also the major issue during the 1980s. The Government took additional steps and submitted in 1985 what came to be called the historic bill - Preschool for All Children.

This proposed that the preschool should not only be linked to parents' need for child care enabling them to work or study, but that it should also be a right for the child - something that all children irrespective of their family situation could take part in. The pedagogical role of the preschool in supporting the child's development and learning from an early age thus became a political issue in itself. The Government's proposal to the Riksdag laid down the principles governing a preschool for all children.

The content of the proposal was that all children from the age of 18 months until

they begin school would have the right to attend preschool. This starting point was chosen since the intention was that parental insurance would gradually be built up in stages from 12 to 18 months as economic conditions allowed. For children of parents, who were working or studying, this right covered places in day care centres, parental co-operatives and family day care homes. For children in family day care homes or whose parents were working at home, the right would apply to open preschool for the youngest children, and children from the age of four could attend part-time groups to the same extent as six year olds in the universal preschool.

The goal was that the preschool system would provide full coverage by 1991, and legislation to this effect was announced. The municipalities then had five years to plan the expansion and fulfil the intentions of the bill. Waiting periods for child care would be measured annually in each municipality, and be cut by a fifth each year. This was an ambitious goal to set, given the fact that barely any of the municipalities were close to providing full coverage of needs.

The state grant was increased yet again - the only means the Minister for Health and Social Affairs could envisage for developing

child care, was the “sour” comment of the Minister for Finance. Part-time groups and open preschool were now entitled to receive state grants since they were also covered in the plan.

In order to reinforce the pedagogical role of the preschool, a proposal on a common framework containing for the whole country a pedagogical programme for the preschool was also submitted. The National Board of Health and Welfare was commissioned by the Government to draw up the programme. The Riksdag then made the decision to implement the principle of a preschool for all children, and this became the foundation for its subsequent expansion.

But it is easy to forget how strong some of the attacks mounted in the Riksdag against day care centres were, “indirectly” these were directed against the right of women to work outside the home at that time.

#### *Action group to promote child care*

Now the staff situation had become problematic. The rapid expansion required an increase of 40 per cent in the number of employees over a five-year period. Not unsurprisingly this led to a shortage in the mid-80s of trained staff, especially in the larger cities. This was due to the slightly changing

status of the profession and the comparably low salaries. Different ways had to be found showing that the preschool was an attractive place to work in if the decision to provide full coverage of needs was going to be achieved.

A period of manifestations about preschools, child culture and play ensued. Campaigns to provide information and recruit staff were carried out. Posters, film screenings, TV and employment exchanges, all highlighted the need for preschool teachers. Funds were set aside for child cultural centres around the country, and these could function as in-service training and inspiration for staff, international contacts in the child area were made.

But as 1991 approached, there were still many municipalities that were not even close to reaching the goal. The impatience of parents was growing and they expected results. What was the real situation – was the decision a solid commitment or just an ambitious goal? In spring 1990, a radical move was made and a commission was set up in the form of an action group for child care and given the task together with the municipalities of drawing up an inventory of possible measures to quickly expand and improve the situation in child care. The chair-

man of the commission became the municipal commissioner in Botkyrka, the very first municipality in the country to introduce a guarantee of child care places within four months.

The action group had little time, a report had to be submitted after the summer, and the group focused on visiting different municipalities. The municipalities which were worst off, were visited by the group and discussions were held with the municipal boards and officials on when the queues could be eliminated, where the obstacles actually existed, and proposals for solutions. The action group was more or less welcomed everywhere. Some municipal politicians were delighted with this interest and made immediate decisions to expand. Suddenly inventiveness was no longer in short supply, whole villages of day care centres were planned to be built in a flash. Others, however, were more doubtful about tying themselves to a specific date, and pointed out the difficulties of getting staff, the worsening financial situation, and the over-optimistic belief that family day care homes would solve the crisis. Only a few municipalities were directly indifferent and completely lacked the will to expand child care, despite incessant coverage from local

radio and the press.

The birth rate was now one of the highest in Europe. And at the same time the number of women at work was almost the same as the number of men. It was obvious that the goal of full coverage in childcare was still too far away for a legislative solution to be effective.

And as it turned out, it would not be the Social Democratic Government that implemented the first stage of the decision on the preschool for all children, but it's Centre-Right successors.

## Preschool and School (1981-1991)

### *Age when starting school*

The age at which children should start school became at this point a major recurring political issue. Reducing the age when children start school from seven to six was discussed internally in the Social Democratic Government. Some of the opposition parties recommended starting at the age of six. Support for this was not widespread among parents and the general public. The day care centre was highly regarded and a secure environment for children of working parents,

with significantly higher staffing ratios and smaller groups than in the school. Why should we change this, children will start school soon enough, many argued. In the preschool they wanted to keep the oldest children, since they were a pedagogical asset for the groups. And wasn't it the case that the school was less than desperate to take care of younger children for whom they had little training.

There were mainly two political arguments for reducing the age at which children start school. Some argued, especially from the Ministry of Finance, that it would be cheaper to start school a year earlier. The preschool would be relieved of the pressure of an annual cohort, the cost per school place for younger children was much lower than in a day care centre. It was also suggested that Sweden with its late school start would appear to be somewhat provincial in relation to the rest of Europe.

The second argument was more pedagogically justified. The school needed to be developed. It could benefit greatly from the pedagogical approaches used in the preschool. Six year olds could function as catalysts and contribute to the development of schooling for the early years. The pedagogy of the preschool and the school could interact and

blend into something more development oriented. The mutual mistrust that existed between preschool and school could perhaps be bridged. What the preschool would gain from this, apart from reduced state grants, was not self-evident.

It wasn't easy to argue in favour of either the economic or pedagogical case. There was opposition in the two ministries responsible and a great deal of uncertainty in the Government. But the question about the six-year-olds remained on the agenda, and opinion in favour of a reduction in the age for starting school was beginning to gain ground.

### *The issue of preschool and school*

If we look back a little further in time, supervisory responsibility for preschool and other forms of child care had been an issue for a long time – was the decision to be based on social or education factors? However, one area where there was agreement was that irrespective of the type of preschooling, the same supervisory authority should be responsible. Since 1945 the National Board of Health and Welfare had had overall responsibility, but this might only be temporary during the expansion phase, since it was not only particularly important to allocate places

fairly on the basis of the needs of children and families, but also important to take social aspects into account.

The age at which children start school was a permanently recurring issue. Sweden, similar to many other countries in the Nordic area started school later than other countries in Europe. The original reasons for this, namely that the country was sparsely populated with long distances between home and school for small children, however, became increasingly inappropriate.

If Sweden had not already had in contrast to many other countries a universal preschool for all six year olds, the question would in all probability have been more quickly resolved. Instead the issue now became a political struggle at the state and municipal level between preschool and school. The trade union representatives of preschool teachers and teachers – the Swedish Teachers' Union argued that the preschool as a whole, not only the six year olds, should be transferred to the education sector.

The age at which compulsory schooling should start was debated during the 1980s and 90s in all the Nordic countries. The struggle between preschool and the school was similar, but the solutions were somewhat different. In Denmark a pres-



school class for six-year-olds was introduced early on, known as the "börnehaveklassen". Other countries were more cautious. Later on in Norway the Centre-Right Government reduced the age to six, and in Finland it is only recently that a universal preschool has been introduced within the framework of the school, a year before starting school. In Iceland, on the other hand, schooling from the age of six has been compulsory for a long time.

### *Flexible school start*

In autumn 1990 the Government's crisis package contained proposals for a flexible school start – this was the first step towards a nine-year compulsory schooling system starting at the age of six. Parents could themselves decide whether their children should begin school at the age of six or seven. The assumption was that more and more parents would choose starting earlier. This could take some of the pressure off the preschool and free up funds to provide some financing for an urgent reform of the upper secondary school.

The fact that parents themselves should decide when their children start school might appear to be clear-cut. In June 1991 the Riksdag decided on a voluntary school

start for children at the age of six or seven, from the autumn term in the same year. The Ministry of Finance made their calculations on how large a proportion of six-year-olds might start earlier, and could thus assess how quickly the reform could be implemented. But many questions remained unclear – would preschool teachers or school teachers take care of the youngest ones, would classes have mixed ages, would the pedagogical programme of the preschool or the school curriculum be applied?

As it turned out these questions never had to be answered since parents were not that enthusiastic about choosing an early school start. It turned out to be a miscalculation to believe that parents would support and choose the early start option, especially as neither the preschool nor the school was particularly interested. A few six-year-olds started school the first year. This figure did not increase much in the coming years.

But the question of starting school earlier would recur and appear in a more radical solution – the preschool class.

### *Leisure-time centres and the school*

At the same time as the question of the preschool and school was being discussed, a commission was appointed to carry out an

investigation into leisure-time centres and the school. The task was to monitor, stimulate and accelerate development towards a more organisationally and pedagogically integrated system for school and school-age child care.

The Commission worked dynamically and allocated funds to projects where school and leisure-time centres co-operated over development. The aim was both economic and pedagogical. The culture of leisure-time centres could enrich schooling. Co-ordination of premises and staff would lead to better use of resources. The contradictions between the leisure-time centre and the school were not as prominent as those between the preschool and school. The Commission proposed that leisure-time centres would be completely integrated with the school in municipalities as regards premises, and pedagogically and organisationally. The school, became the new working place for leisure-time pedagogues and recreational leaders.

## Change in Government (1991-1994)

### *Change in Government again*

The results of the election in September 1991 led to a shift in Government. The Social Democratic Government handed over responsibility to a coalition four party Centre-Right Government. The Government policy statement proclaimed a systemic change announcing deregulation, privatisation and freedom of choice. The child care allowance and state grants for all forms of private preschooling were promised.

With a flying start, the Minister for Health and Social Affairs, a member of the Liberal Party and also Deputy Prime Minister, first took up the question on the right of free establishment in child care. During the course of a single mandate period, he was able to extend parental insurance in the child area, and introduce the first "daddy's" month, launch an initiative for preschool teachers by extending preschool teacher training by 20 credit points to three years, and he also introduced the first Children's Ombudsman. On his initiative, generous

Minister for Schools, Göran Persson with school children 1989.



funding was provided for projects managed by voluntary organisations for children with an immigrant or refugee background, within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He also submitted a bill on new legislation for child care. His slogan was freedom of choice, diversity and gender equality.

### *A revolution for freedom of choice?*

In the election the four party Government had clearly shown they were united over family policy. This issue had long been a major stumbling block. The Christian Democrats and the Centre party drove the child care allowance, whilst the Liberal party was strongly opposed. Instead they wanted to continue the expansion of child care in new non-municipal forms. For the Conservatives, the highest priority was tax relief for the costs of child care including care provided in one's own home.

One of the first measures taken by the Minister for Health and Social Affairs was to submit a bill on the right of free establishment in child care. Now non-municipal preschool and leisure-time activities could be run on commercial grounds as well.

But privatisation only proceeded slowly. It resulted in an increase in the proportion of

private preschools, at the same time as municipal preschools were being closed down. But conditions on the labour market had become less stable, with redundancies and unemployment increasing. At this time few were prepared to give up secure employment to run privatised centres.

To counteract this and promote privatisation, the Centre-Right Government decided to take further steps. Now municipalities were obliged to provide the same funding per place as in corresponding municipal child care for all privately run preschool and leisure-time centres. In determining whether to provide a permit, only the suitability of the principal organiser and the premises were to be considered. However, fees could not deviate unreasonably from those of the municipality. In practice, the right to free establishment of child care was introduced with the same financial conditions for municipal and private entities.

In the same bill, it was also proposed that a taxable child care allowance of SEK 2,000 a month should be introduced, together with the right to tax relief on child care costs up to a maximum amount. The four party Government was thus able to enact all its most important issues in child and family policy.

Some municipalities were extremely

concerned about this, as they regarded it as compulsory privatisation. Necessary rationalisations had already been started, unemployment had begun to increase substantially and the economy became increasingly weak. Under such conditions how could the budget be kept? And was it really the intention that public funds should be used to run preschools operated by "religious sects"? Critics pointed out the risk of deteriorating quality, unnecessary cost increases and greater segregation.

#### *Reverting to earlier situation*

When the Social Democratic Government returned to office once again in 1995, it immediately proposed the revocation of the decision on the right to free establishment. At the same time the child care allowance and the right to tax relief on child care costs previously introduced by the four party Centre-Right Government were withdrawn. The bill put forward by the Social Democrats outlined their policy on privately run centres in the child care area;

*" Private child care in the form of parental co-operatives and other private activities can enrich and develop child care. In the future this will be an important complement to municipal child care. But the municipalities must be able*

*to plan and steer resources to where they are most needed. For this reason, we are opposed to legislation which would lead to over-establishment of child care, the right to tax relief on private childcare financed out of public funds, and forcing municipalities to close down municipal day care centres. Resources should not be misused, but used for the good of the child."*

The right to free establishment in fact had not come into force, but a private person, association, or religious group which fulfils the requirements for quality and safety could also in the future run preschools and leisure-time centres. However, the municipality, now once again would decide whether to grant a permit or not. Financial conditions should as before be the same for both municipal and privately run activities.

The proportion of privately run preschools increased with the approval of the municipalities, mostly in large cities and suburban municipalities, and least in sparsely populated areas and industrial municipalities. Over time in some municipalities, especially in the suburbs under the control of the Centre-Right, a large proportion of preschools were run by non-municipal players. Parental co-operatives continued to be the most common form, but other forms and different pedagogical orientations were also



increasing. In 2006, 17 per cent of preschool children were registered in privately run preschools.

Despite this, the right to free establishment remained one of the recurring issues in child care, together with the child care allowance and the age at which school should be started. In February of the election-year 2006, the Green party allied itself with the four Centre-Right parties and achieved a majority for re-introducing the right to free establishment for preschools in the Riksdag.

#### Child Care Guarantee Incorporated in New Act (1995)

##### *The new legislation on child care*

The new legislation on child care which entered into force 1995 would bring to an end a protracted period where the only obligation of the municipality was to plan the expansion of child care. Now the municipalities would actually supply places for children from the age of one in the preschool and

Children at preschool celebrating Lucia 1991.

leisure-time centres, or family day care homes, municipal or private, and without unreasonable delay. Preschooling and school-age child care would have sufficient coverage to enable parents to manage their work or studies.

The proposal was that the legislation should be broadened and made more detailed on a number of points. New provisions on quality were introduced, although they were not highly specific; the groups should have the right composition and size, the premises should be appropriate for preschooling, and the staff should have either appropriate training or experience. However, the bill also contained proposals that the proportion of preschool teachers, representing about half the total at that time, should be increased in the future. The principle of proximity between the home and preschool for preschool children, or their leisure-time centre and school for younger school children was laid down in the legislation. The law also stated that children in need of special support should also have their needs satisfied.

It was still the case that only the children of parents who were working or studying would be entitled to child care. Preschool for the benefit of the child through a universal preschool from the age of four was not

included. On the other hand the obligation required that children from the age of one up to twelve be provided with a place. Under the legislation there was a commitment to expand school-age child care. In this situation, it was absolutely clear that if preschooling were expanded, this would lead to a need for more school-age child care, and also because the large annual cohorts from the end of the 1980s were coming closer to the age when they would start at leisure-time centres.

The Riksdag decided by a clear majority to accept the proposals in the bill. The Social Democrats, who were in opposition, had earlier announced their intention of introducing such legislation and thus in principle had no objections. The right to free establishment, child care allowance and tax relief on the costs of child care also contained in the bill were, however, rejected by the Social Democratic opposition.

#### *Without unreasonable delay*

Most of what was laid down in the law were principles that were already familiar, but the formulation "provide places without unreasonable delay" was completely new and brought a strong reaction from Swedish Association of Local Authorities. Although the

legislation was formulated as an obligation on the part of the municipalities, and not as a right for the private person, this could be taken to court by any citizen in the municipality. And it was particularly clear in the preamble to the bill that "unreasonable delay" referred to a maximum period of three to four months after applying for a place. The majority of the municipalities, but by no means all, were at this stage providing either full or nearly full needs coverage for child care. This was a pre-requisite for introducing legislation of this type. But the high birth rate meant that many more children than normal would need a place over the coming years.

In addition, the legislation meant that municipal provision of places would have to correspond to changes in the birth rate, as well as population inflows and outflows in municipalities and districts in a completely different way compared to earlier. An increase or reduction in the number of new births meant the number of places needed could increase or decrease at short notice. The flexibility and preparedness of the municipalities would now be put to the test. The legislation put great demands on the municipalities, particularly as thousands of parents in each municipality would be



acutely aware of their rights. There were also people, both at the municipal and central level, who in the light of the prevailing economic situation, and fluctuations in the birth rate, doubted whether the reform could really be implemented.

But the legislation actually worked, despite the many reservations on the part of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities. In the first follow-up in 1995, about 80 per cent of the municipalities were able to provide preschooling in accordance with the new requirements at the start of the autumn. Thereafter municipal preparedness increased rapidly and for a number of years now all municipalities have in principle been able to provide preschooling without unreasonable delay, and the same applies to school-age child care.

A new generation of Swedish parents with small children no longer regard child care as a privilege, but as a right.

## Economic Crisis (1990s)

### *Baby-boom*

Towards the end of the 1980s, the birth rate increased sharply in Sweden, many more children were born than usual. Such large

increases had last taken place way back at the beginning of the 1930s. The largest number of children, around 124,000 were born in 1990, this corresponded to 2.13 children per woman. After Iceland and Ireland, the Swedish birth rate was the highest in Europe. In the same year the number of women in the labour market, which had been increasing throughout the 1970s and 80s, reached a peak of 86 per cent of all women with children aged one to six. A strong belief in the future coupled with intensive measures in child care and parental insurance had contributed to the high birth rate by making it advantageous to have children at short intervals.

### *Economic crisis*

After a decade of full employment, in autumn 1991 Sweden was affected by a serious economic crisis which led to rapidly increasing unemployment. There was also a very sharp decline in the birth rate. From having been amongst the highest in Europe, the birth rate now sank to the lowest level ever measured in the country - 1.5 children per woman. The reduction in the birth rate took place at the same time as there was a substantial increase in unemployment. Various studies have shown the connection between

low employment, low incomes and low birth rates. In contrast to most other European countries, unemployment in Sweden does not appear to have led to an increase, but the opposite, a reduction in the birth rate. The economic situation created major challenges for welfare. Child care also had to bear the brunt of sweeping economic cutbacks. The start of a recession had an impact on the situation, election promises were postponed to the future.

#### *Pressure to expand*

During the first half of the 1990s, there was great pressure to expand. More rigorous requirements on the municipalities to provide places without unreasonable delay in preschooling and school-age child care, in combination with high birth rates meant that many new places were added each year. The total number of children registered increased from 571,000 to 753,000 children. In the preschool alone, the number of children increased by close to 100,000 children, from 270,000 to 365 000. At the same time the number of children in family day care homes decreased. Towards the end of the 1990s, leisure-time centres had to cater for large numbers of children by substantially increasing group size and decreasing staffing ratios.

During the years 1994-1997, the proportion of children aged between 1-6 years in preschool and family day care centres increased from 59 to 65 per cent, and from 52 to 56 per cent in school-age child care. In contrast to the earlier years of the expansion, there was a large increase in the number of children in child care during the 1990s in unchanging economic conditions, but at increasingly higher fees. Gross costs in fixed prices were the same in 1991 as in 1997 – SEK 42 billion, although the number of children registered increased during this period by 185,000. This implies an average cost reduction per place of 30 per cent.

#### *Economic cutbacks*

Most municipalities used reductions in staff as a means of bringing the costs of child care down. Often it was child minders who had to leave the sector, who became unemployed or worked in other sectors of society such as care of the elderly. This meant that the proportion of preschool teachers increased, and in the middle of the 1990s, 58 per cent of the staff had received preschool training, which was the highest figure that had yet been achieved. Having well educated staff became a kind of insurance that quality would not be jeopardised by cutbacks. But

many pointed out that the nature of the profession had changed in some respects due mainly to the fact that the groups were becoming increasingly large at the same time as staff were being reduced. More children in the preschool needed special support as the groups became larger and the staff fewer. Some municipalities took far-reaching rationalisation measures and reached a limit that staff could accept. This undermined the good reputation of the preschool and the loyalty of the staff to their employers, the municipalities. The staff tried to make the best of the situation and minimise the negative consequences for parents and children. Different pedagogical strategies were developed to manage the new situation.

Earlier it was unusual to have groups with more than 15 children in the preschool. But now there was a rapid increase in group size. The differences between municipalities became accentuated. At the end of the decade, just a small proportion of all the country's preschools had 15 children in the groups. It was far more common that the groups had up to 20 children, and sometimes even more. Close to three per cent of the groups had 26 or more children – figures that were quite unthinkable prior to 1990!

The situation was better for younger

children, but there were still many groups with more than 16 children. Staffing ratios varied between municipalities from 3.9 children per annual worker on average to 6.7, but extremely low staffing ratios were also found in some municipalities – 7 - 10 children per annual worker had disappeared.

When the Social Democratic Government regained power in 1994, Göran Persson, first as Minister for Finance and then as Prime Minister, implemented his far-reaching reorganisation of public finances. The impact was evident on families with children, who were faced with reductions in sickness benefit and parental insurance, and the withdrawal of the multi-child supplements in the child allowance.

#### *Municipal differences*

At the same time as the cutbacks were affecting child care, the municipalities were raising fees. The parents' share of costs of preschooling and school-age child care virtually doubled during the 1990s from 10 to 20 per cent. Differences between the municipalities became increasingly larger. In some cases the fees for families could be much higher in one municipality compared with another. The fees became more related to income and time spent at the centres. Some muni-

cipalities introduced hourly fees to reduce what was regarded as over-utilisation. For a low salaried single-parent, the difference in fees between one municipality and another could amount to SEK 30 000. The term "reasonable fees" as laid down in the legislation on child care, increasingly appeared to have lost its meaning.

Other differences were different rule systems introduced by the municipalities. In order to reduce costs, municipalities in close to half of the country applied rules which meant that children whose parents became unemployed could not keep their places in the preschool. This was a new situation for many parents – first getting a place for their child and then having to relinquish it, or that the child started and then had to leave preschool at short notice since their parents were taking part in different labour market training measures. Still more unusual was the fact that children of parents on leave of absence could keep their places in preschooling.

## From Family Policy to Education Policy (1996-1998)

### *Preschool to improve school*

In March 1996 the new Prime Minister, Göran Persson, gave his Government policy statement to the Riksdag. It contains a few lines that will lead to a major change in preschooling and school-age child care; *"Lifelong learning should be a foundation stone in Government policy for combating unemployment. Sweden should be able to compete with high competence, and the prerequisites for this are to be provided through high-quality in all school forms, from preschool to higher education. The preschool should contribute to improving the important early years of the compulsory school"*.

The question of whether the preschool and the leisure-time centre should be part of family policy or education policy had now long been a perennial issue.

Still no good solution had yet been found for the age at which children start school and the transition between preschool and school. A work group with representatives from the ministries involved had without any major success been working on the question of starting school at the age of six.

Large cohorts of children were affected and a variety of views existed as to what the cost implications would be of reducing the age at which children start school. This led to indefinite postponement.

As a result of a new Municipal Act, a new state grant system and deregulation, developments in municipalities meant that in the near future all municipalities would introduce boards to oversee school and child care. And now it was the right time for preschooling and school-age child care to be integrated at the state level with the school and come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. The key idea was integration and this was the start of a new epoch in the history of the Swedish preschool.

### *Preschool class*

The Minister for Schools, who now took over responsibility for preschooling and school-age child care, wanted to move away from the idea of child care as a part of family policy, towards a preschool in the education system focusing on the child's development and learning.

Preschool "Höjden", Stockholm 1998.



The first question concerned the universal preschool for six year olds and the transition from preschool to school and leisure-time centres. The fundamental idea was that all these forms should be integrated within the framework of the school and co-operate closely together.

The school curriculum was revised to incorporate the universal preschool for six year olds and the leisure-time centres. New terms were introduced into the curriculum which have their origins in the culture of preschool and leisure-time centres – play, exploration, and creativity through pictures, texts and use of models. The model of a work team with different competencies based on the model from preschool and the leisure-time centres was regarded as an important springboard for the school's development.

It was now proposed that the preschool for six-year-olds, covering all children since the very first Preschool Act of 1975 should become a separate school form in the education system and be called the Preschool Class. This was a radically new proposal that had not existed in any of the commissions carried out earlier in the area.

The preschool class became a part of the school, without, however, being compulsory. The transfer of six year olds from the pres-

chool to school premises was managed in municipality after municipality and during the afternoons they attended leisure-time centres.

The preschool class, as a meeting place between the preschool, school and leisure-time centre, should provide the preconditions for different professions and competencies to work together in teams. Preschool teachers and leisure-time pedagogues would, on the same conditions as compulsory school teachers, work pedagogically and teach in the school. Child minders were also part of the work team.

From the beginning, the staff knew it would require both time and dedicated work to implement integration between the preschool, school and leisure-time centres in a way that would leverage the strengths of their multiple traditions, and also create something quite new. And the evaluations would confirm what had been predicted; change of this kind is not easily achieved – it is built up over time.

### *Curriculum for Preschool*

The other question concerned the preschool for children aged between 1-5 years. This would also be transferred into the education system. And now everything happe-

ned quickly, a bill on a curriculum for the preschool was submitted to the Riksdag in March 1998, and by June the same year the preschool had got its first real curriculum with legal provisions setting out pedagogical content in an ordinance.

The proposal for the curriculum for the preschool had been worked out by a state commission consisting of pedagogical experts. The Government had to take a position on a document which on the basis of common foundation values set up the pedagogical goals. The goals mirrored those that existed in the school curriculum, not only the nature of the goals in terms of what the children should have achieved when they leave preschool, but also the goals to strive towards that should provide a focus for the pedagogical work of the preschool. The curriculum was addressed not only to preschool teachers, but also to all who were working in the preschool.

After careful deliberations, the decision was taken to make some essential modifications to the recommendations of the commission. The idea that the curriculum for the preschool should set up goals for the individual child's learning was hardly in line with the existing pedagogical traditions and cultures in the Swedish preschool. This was

an easy decision for the Minister for Schools to take. The preschool curriculum would only contain goals to strive towards. More difficult was the question about preschool teachers and the work team. It was only after much discussion that the decision was taken that the curriculum should focus on all the staff in the work team, and this included child minders, as well as preschool teachers.

The terms "day care centre" and "part-time group" were now completely removed from the Education Act and replaced by the term "preschool". Family day care homes and open preschool were not covered by the curriculum, but it would provide guidelines for them as well.

The curriculum was received with great enthusiasm by the staff. Now the preschool had finally achieved the status of "education" it had long aspired to, and this applied to the whole of the preschool for children from the age of one until starting in the preschool class - from an international perspective, this was indeed unique. Of course, preschool teachers and their trade unions would have preferred it if the curriculum had been exclusively addressed to preschool teachers i.e. those with the higher education background. Child minders on the other hand were satisfied that they were part of the work

team and had a legitimate role to play as laid down in the curriculum. But to remove any possible misunderstanding, all preschools received a letter from the Minister for Schools where she emphasised that she regarded preschool teachers as indispensable in the preschool.

### *Views on the child in the curriculum*

The wide-ranging work carried out as part of the preparations for the curriculum for the preschool communicated a view of the child's development and learning which felt familiar in preschool contexts, and yet at the same time was new. To a very large extent, this view builds on traditional preschool pedagogy. Added to this was the new inspirational thinking which the Reggio Emilia approach had brought to the Swedish preschool.

Reggio Emilia, a Mecca in northern Italy for thousands of Swedish preschool teachers and commissions, committees and ministers, had developed a preschool pedagogy that had become an important and extensive source of inspiration for the Swedish preschool. It is founded on Loris Malaguzzi's (1922-1994) philosophy and pedagogy. This contains the fundamental characteristics which are also part of Swedish preschool

pedagogy - the child as an active, competent and exploring being, project and theme oriented working approaches, and the democratic perspective on the child's acquisition of knowledge and learning.

The Reggio Emilia inspiration is based on respect for the child, a being with many resources, and curious, a child with a hundred languages, with his/her own dynamics and desire to learn. The importance of the pedagogical environment and pedagogical documentation for making learning processes more transparent is used as a fundamental tool. The fact that the Reggio Emilia approach became so widely disseminated in Sweden could well be because in some respects it resembled that of the Swedish preschool, but in a more audacious and sharper form.

On this dual foundation of tradition and renewal rests the curriculum of the Swedish preschool - a concise yet precise document, containing goals and guidelines that pedagogical activities should strive towards. This document was the foundation that was submitted to the professional staff so that they could create their own activities, based on a task, a foundation value, and a democratic view of the child's development and learning.





Study group from Sweden outside the town hall in Reggio Emilia 1993.



Sergio Spaggiari, head of child care, and Professor Loris Malaguzzi 1989.

## Maximum Fee and Universal Preschool (1999-2003)

### *Preschool, but not for everyone*

Is it possible to have a preschool in the education system that is not open to all children? At the end of the 1990s, this became an acute issue. The fees, which were now increasingly related to the time children spent at the centres and parental income, had increased so much that some parents decided to opt for other alternatives to child care. In order to put pressure on costs, the municipalities had also streamlined the organisation - larger groups of children, lower child staff ratios, and tighter rules determining which children were entitled to preschooling.

Children of unemployed parents lost their places in more and more municipalities, and the children of parents on leave of absence experienced even greater difficulties in keeping their places in the preschool. The municipalities reorganised their finances, both by introducing higher fees and by reducing quality. Many of the children who were perhaps in greatest need of the preschool were not able to obtain a place. The 1991 goals set up for a preschool for all children had still not been achieved.

### *Halve the fee for day care centres!*

In the latter part of the 1990s, all the indicators showed that the economy would turn upwards. Unemployment decreased – and there was also a risk of inflationary bottlenecks in some industries. Families with children were the group most severely affected by the budgetary measures, and the Government's view was they should thus be the first to benefit from the improving economy.

In August 1998, a couple of days before the Social Democrats published their election manifesto, some LO economists published an article in Dagens Nyheter (daily newspaper) under the title *Halve the fee for day care centres!*

What the article focused on most was the marginal effects that income and time related fees for child care meant for women with children, who were thinking about increasing their working hours or getting a better paid job. The argument put forward by economists from the Trade union movement (LO) was that the best way of strengthening the finances of families with children was to radically reduce the fees for child care.

Parents and children out demonstrating for the maximum fee in Stockholm 1999.

FRAMTIDEN  
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The Social Democrats obviously accepted this and in their election manifesto presented a proposal on maximum fees in child care and an obligation for the municipalities to provide preschooling for the children of the unemployed. In addition, an undertaking was made to provide a universal preschool free of charge for all children from the age of four.

Already in the budget bill for the spring the year after, funds were set aside for a reform with maximum fees and a universal preschool. An interdepartmental work group was charged with the task of developing proposals on how the reform could be introduced by stages.

#### *A controversial reform*

The fees for child care were not only high, but they also varied widely throughout the country. In some municipalities the average fee for a preschool place was less than SEK 8,000 a year, whilst in others it was more than SEK 20,000. In one municipality, the parent's share of the cost was 31 per cent, yet in another just 8 per cent. There was also in many municipalities a political attitude which was in principle positive to raising fees. In this way awareness of the real cost of these services would be increased, people

could choose other alternatives or just use them as much as they really needed or were prepared to pay for. The maximum fee was in many respects controversial. The proposals of the work group were circulated for official comment, and the country was split between those for and those against, along purely party political lines. The municipalities under the control of the Centre-Right parties said no, whilst the Social Democrats argued the opposite.

Even though the introduction of the maximum rate was intended to be voluntary for the municipalities, and they would be well compensated from state funds, it did encroach on municipal autonomy.

It was important for the Ministry of Education that the whole reform package should be included, even if it had to be introduced in stages – not least the universal pre-school. For once, the Ministry of Finance was deeply involved in a proposal affecting the preschool. But interest was mainly restricted to the maximum fee and unemployment. The Minister for Schools had to take the initiative to drive the question of the universal preschool. She was also very determined on having a built-in safety valve which was introduced into the proposal, and which stated

that the Government undertook to return to the issue if it turned out that the financing provided for the reform was insufficient. The maximum fee should not jeopardise quality in preschooling. Special quality assurance funds were thus paid out, in addition to financing for the maximum fee itself.

For a long time the maximum fee was the subject of intense debate in the press. Many critics had no doubt of its negative impact on quality. Queues would become long, group size would increase, and worst of all children would have very long days in the preschool, as the time spent would not be regulated by fees. In addition, it was considered to be a reform that would only favour middle and high income earners.

One group which didn't protest were the parents themselves. Demonstrations and processions were organised in municipalities which refused to introduce the maximum fee. Once again the protests were vehement, but this time it concerned the fees.

#### *Maximum fee and preschool for all children*

On 1 January 2001, the first step in the reform was taken. Children of unemployed parents received the right to preschooling, both in terms of obtaining a place and keeping a place they might already have. On the

initiative of the Green party, a year later it was also extended to cover children whose parents were at home under the parental insurance scheme for taking care of another child. A year later a maximum fee was introduced, the implementation of which was voluntary for the municipalities. And all municipalities introduced the maximum fee. On 1 January 2003, a universal preschool free of charge, was finally introduced for all children aged four and five.

The maximum fee and a universal preschool free of charge was a major and important reform, not just for the financial position of families with children, but also in terms of the recognition it gave to preschooling and school-age child care. By means of this reform package, child care became a truly fundamental part of general welfare that would benefit all children since fees were either low or non-existent. Notification was also given of a zero fee.

#### *Evaluation of the National Agency for Education*

What happened to quality? The National Agency for Education was given the task of evaluating the maximum fee and reporting annually. Their reports showed that the reservations expressed by the critics had not materialised in reality. The queues didn't in-

crease, groups didn't become larger, and the time children spent at the centres didn't become longer. On the other hand, many more children now had access to the preschool. In 2005 the proportion of children registered in the preschool had increased to 77 per cent from 68 per cent the year before the reform was implemented. In the groups aged between four and six years, more than 95 per cent of preschool children were involved. And that was in fact the very purpose of the reform.

Follow-up studies carried out by the National Agency for Education showed, despite the increasing number of children, that the education levels of the staff had been raised, and that the number of children per annual worker had decreased as had the size of the groups. The number of hours spent in the preschool was unchanged at 32 a week on average for children whose parents were working or studying. 20 per cent of the children stayed for periods of up to 15 hours a week, which represented a doubling compared with the situation prior to the reform.

The maximum fee led to a major improvement in the finances of families with children. The fees for child care today are essentially the same as at the beginning of the 1990s. This means that fees as a propor-

tion of income are lower today, since real salaries have increased by about 30 per cent since that time. After the reform, on average a family had a reduction of SEK 12 000 in the fees it paid each year.

The idea that maximum fees was a reform just for middle and high income families was not in line with the facts. Fees were also substantially lower for low salaried single parents. As a percentage of salary, this was the group to benefit most from the introduction of the maximum fee.

## Quality in Preschool (2003-2006)

### *Raising quality*

It was difficult to restore quality to its state before the economic crisis of the 1990s. Some improvements could be seen in staffing ratios and group sizes, but progress was slow, and still some way into the 2000s quality had not been restored to the levels prior to the crisis. More funds for the preschool was one of the major election promises in 2002. When a new Minister for the Preschool was appointed in October, preschooling was one of the areas in the Government Policy statement which was allocated addi-

tional state grants to fund staff increases in the preschool.

As a result of this, the Minister was able to tackle the issue of restoring and further developing quality in the preschool. One particular question concerned a new Education Act, where the preschool could be made into a separate school form integrated in the education system, on conditions similar to other school forms.

### *The Preschool Bill*

In September 2004, a bill was submitted on the principles for quality in the preschool to the Riksdag. In this, the Government outlined how a special state grant would be allocated to municipalities to increase staff in the preschool. From 1 January 2005, SEK 5 billion was earmarked for the municipalities, starting with SEK 1 billion in the first year, and SEK 2 billion in the second and third years. Thereafter funding would be incorporated in the general state grant by raising the level to SEK 2 billion. The funds would correspond to the cost of employing 6,000 preschool teachers, child minders, and other staff - a 10 per cent increase in the number of employees in the preschool. In principle this meant that average staff rati-

os in the municipalities would once again be one adult to every five children, and group sizes would on average be 15 children per staff member. The requirement that quality in preschooling and school-age child care should be reported annually just like the school was also decided on.

Other issues which were dealt with in the bill were about the role of the preschool in a future Education Act. A parliamentary commission into the Education Act appointed in 1999 had submitted a report containing far-reaching proposals for integrating the preschool in the Education Act by having legislation in all major respects common to all school forms, including the preschool. This involved dealing with terms originating from the school world, rather than the world of the preschool – school form, pupil, teaching, head teacher etc all of which required careful deliberation. However, the Minister did not propose any change in the tasks of the preschool. Transforming the preschool into a separate school form meant, however, that municipalities in the future would not be able to deny a child a place in the preschool and provide a place in a family day care home instead. This was an important quality issue for preschooling.

An investigation was carried out into

legislation concerning different staff categories. The principle was laid down that there must be preschool teachers in all preschools, and that preschool teachers would have the overall responsibility for pedagogical work, but that child minders and other staff should also be part of the work team. The representatives of the Swedish Teachers' Union and the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, appeared perhaps for the first time in history to be relatively satisfied with how the position and role of both staff categories in the preschool could be resolved.

The question of care during the evenings, nights and weekends was of particular interest to the Minister, but no parliamentary support was forthcoming for clarifying legislation on this point.

### *Gender equality and multi-culturalism*

The Minister was also very concerned about the quality of pedagogical content in the preschool. Special measures were taken to support gender equality and multi-culturalism in the preschool. A delegation was established to allocate funds to development projects in order to strengthen and develop gender equality in the preschool and create greater awareness of what the preschool could achieve in this area. Tools would be

developed enabling the staff in the preschool to examine and analyse pedagogical material from a gender perspective. Another task was to provide proposals to increase the recruitment of males to the preschool.

In addition, the curriculum would be strengthened by incorporating mother tongue tuition in languages other than Swedish. Children with an immigrant background would receive support in the preschool not only to develop their Swedish, but also their own mother tongue. On this very point, the curriculum had been relatively vague and reflected the uncertain position which had long existed in the preschool and which had resulted in dismantlement of much of the system that had been built up to provide support for mother tongue tuition.

### *Listening to children's views*

Allowing children to give their views on a bill in the Riksdag was unusual, if not unique. But this is precisely what happened. They gave their views on the bill, what they thought was good and bad, and what could be improved. Trainee teachers had interviewed many hundreds of preschool children aged between three and five on these questions. Before this, large numbers of drawings and statements in writing from preschool





The art room of a preschool.

children had reached the ministry on the initiative of the Minister.

The children said that the very best thing about preschool was that they could play there. Not unsurprisingly being able to play is the most important thing, their whole life circles around this. Children play outside and inside, they have their favourite games, and they create new games. When playing children are inventors, artists and researchers.

*“The best thing about day care is you’re free to be a child. You can play hide-and-peek, climb in the climbing frame and do all sorts of other fun things”* says Amanda, aged 5.

*“When I play on my own I have a funny feeling in my tummy. It’s no fun. But when I can be with someone else it’s sunny in my tummy”* says Ahmed, aged 5.

What do children do in preschool? There are many things they do; reading books, writing, counting, drawing and painting, playing games, carpentry, building, playing rock music, eating fruit and singing, digging, playing outside, baking, running a cafe, showing their parents what they have done, playing computer games, football, bandy, cycling, going on the swings, dressing up, playing theatre, doing jigsaw puzzles, have assemblies, cleaning and tidying up – this is quite boring!

And a lot of other different things.

*“Do you learn anything at preschool?” – “Of course, we learn to be clever and kind.” “Why are you at preschool?” – “Because we’re children”.*

*A final comment*

Göran Persson, Prime Minister, speaking in Björkvik in the summer of 2005, just one year before the election, says about the preschool:

*“I suppose you do remember what it was like earlier, all the uncertainty about quality in preschooling, and especially whether you could get a place at all. And so we decided that everyone should have a right to a place in public child care, that’s when we started expanding it. It cost enormous sums of money during the 1970s. We then added a pedagogical dimension and raised quality. Today a good place in a day care centre is an unquestioned right, a place that should be available at a time you need it with staff trained to do the work. My friends, we will do precisely the same for the care of the elderly as well”.*

Freedom of establishment and strengthened educational mandate (2006–2014)

*Freedom of establishment and the extended universal preschool*

During the tenure of the Social Democratic Government – and following a committee initiative by the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats and the Green Party – the Riksdag adopted legislative amendments providing freedom of establishment for independent providers of preschools and out-of-school centres. Following a proposal by the centre-right government, freedom of establishment was also introduced on 1 July 2009 for other forms of preschool services and school-age childcare. At the same time, the term ‘family day-care home’ was removed from the act and replaced by the new term, ‘pedagogical care’, a collective term encompassing family day-care homes as one of several possible alternatives. As a result of these amendments, municipalities were obliged to approve and provide grants (through the childcare voucher system) to independently run preschools,

out-of-school centres and pedagogical care providers if certain conditions were met, including the quality, safety and security standards required for corresponding public activities. With regard to pedagogical care, grants were also to be given for the carer’s own children, but for no more of the carer’s children than for the number of other children enrolled in the service.

The introduction of the childcare voucher system was intended to increase diversity in preschool activities and school-age childcare through a greater variety of activity types. It was also intended to provide more scope for individual initiatives and entrepreneurship in the welfare area. At present, almost 20 per cent of all children in preschool are enrolled in independent preschools. Since 2003, four- and five-year-olds have been entitled to universal preschool for 525 hours per year. The bill in which the Government proposed the childcare voucher system also included a proposal to expand the municipality’s obligation to organise universal preschool education. Consequently, since 1 July 2010, preschool has been offered to all children from the autumn term of the year in which they reach their third birthday.

### *New Education Act and revised curriculum*

Prior to the 2006 election, the Social Democratic Government worked to complete a government bill on a new Education Act, based on the report of the 1999 Education Act Committee. The report had been presented in 2002. However, the Government was unable to obtain a majority for its proposals in the Riksdag, so no bill was ever adopted. The work on a new Education Act consequently had to be reinitiated following the change of government in September 2006, when the centre-right, four-party government took office. In 2009, the Government also instructed the National Agency for Education to propose changes to the preschool curriculum in the form of clarifications and certain new sections. Following the presentation of the National Agency for Education's proposals, however, a working group was appointed at the Ministry in 2010, which presented new proposals to the Government that were then adopted in August that same year.

The curriculum's objectives for children's language and communicative development, as well as for their

mathematical development, were thus clarified and extended. The objectives for natural sciences and technology also became clearer and greater in number. The objectives provide a direction for preschool educational activities. A new section was added as well concerning monitoring, evaluation and development. How evaluation was to take place in preschool had long been a controversial issue and was not addressed in the curriculum. Finally, the authorities responsible for preschools and the staff now had some guidance in their work on monitoring and evaluation.

The aim of evaluation is to obtain knowledge about the quality of the preschool that can be used to develop the activities to ensure that each child is given the best opportunities for development and learning.

On 1 July 2011, the new Education Act and the amendments to the preschool curriculum entered into force. Preschool had now become an integral part of the school system, with the aim of consolidating its status as the first step of the education system and of enhancing its quality and equity. This meant that several of the provisions in the introductory chapter of the Education Act that apply to all

forms of school also applied to preschool, including the overall objectives of education. Moreover, the basic values for the entire school system were set out, as were regulations for systematic quality enhancement. With a clear link to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it was made clear that the best interests of the child were to form the basis of all education. The majority of assessments presented in the 2004 government bill on preschools were carried out and have now become legislation. In this way, preschool became a distinct form of school, and common regulations were established for municipal and independent preschools. For example, the preschool curriculum also applies to independent preschools. The concepts of 'education' and 'teaching' would now also apply to preschool.

A new position as 'preschool head' was introduced into the Education Act, with the same qualification requirements as for school heads. The educational activities at preschools are to be led and coordinated by a preschool head, whose particular responsibilities also include developing the preschool's activities. The responsibilities of the preschool head were also clarified in a new section of the curriculum. The

preschool head is both the educational leader and the head of staff, and has overall responsibility for running the preschool in accordance with the Education Act and the curriculum. Responsibility for quality at the preschool is also included.

The new Education Act also required every preschool to have qualified preschool teachers who are responsible for teaching. Preschool teacher certification was fully introduced in autumn 2012, and only certified preschool teachers can be offered permanent employment as preschool teachers. In addition to preschool teachers, other staff may also continue to work in preschools, including child minders, whose skills contribute to the care, development and learning of the children. The educational responsibilities of preschool teachers were also clarified in the curriculum. Some of the working guidelines are now clearly directed at preschool teachers who, accordingly, have been given the educational responsibility for children's development and learning. There are also guidelines concerning individual responsibility in the working team. Both preschool teachers and child minders, as well as others in the team, are to jointly design and carry out the educational activities in order to meet the objectives of the curriculum.

### *Boost for Preschool*

The clarification of the preschool curriculum also required increased knowledge and enhanced teaching skills among preschool staff. To strengthen the skills of preschool staff, the 'Boost for Preschool' in-service training initiative was implemented in 2009–2011. The aim was to help to strengthen the educational role of preschool and promote the fulfilment of its objectives. Preschool heads, preschool teachers and child minders participating in the Boost for Preschool initiative received continuing professional development within the areas specified in the curriculum, particularly children's development in language and mathematics, as well as natural sciences, technology and evaluation. The Boost for Preschool initiative was extended several times and will be concluded at the end of 2015, when it will be replaced by a new continuing professional development initiative.

### *New preschool teacher education*

The teacher education programme, with a single teaching qualification, started in 2001. One of the fundamental ideas of

the reform was students' freedom of choice, i.e. the right to freely choose courses and specialisations. The education programme was criticised, however, for excessive freedom of choice, a lack of sufficient scientific grounding and the absence of important areas of knowledge. One problem with the programme was also that it was often directed at broad age ranges, for example 1–12 years and 12–19 years, which resulted in students having difficulty gaining the knowledge and skills appropriate for the entire age range. In addition, too few students chose preschool as their future workplace.

The new preschool teacher education programme started in the autumn term 2011, offering a distinct specialisation on working in preschool and a clearer professional identity compared with the previous teacher education programme. As previously, the programme comprises 210 higher education credits, corresponding to 3.5 years of full-time study. The primary teacher programme was introduced at the same time, comprising 240 higher education credits and entailing six more months of education than previously. The programme is offered with three specialisations: the first focuses on work in the preschool class

Learning about letters.



and years 1–3 of compulsory school; the second on work in years 4–6; and the third on work in out-of-school centres. The specialisation on work in out-of-school centres is a three-year programme, however.

The new preschool teacher programme is clearer, more structured and more specialised, and has become more appealing, attracting many more applicants. This has created greater competition for places, resulting in a higher level of prior knowledge among students.





## Afterword

This publication on the development of preschool was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research. It is based on oral sources, inquiries, government bills, parliamentary records and reports on preschools during the period 1970–2006, and on material found in the bibliography. The text was written by Barbara Martin Korpi, formerly Senior Adviser at the Ministry of Education and Research. By the time she retired in 2007, she had worked for several decades at the Government Offices on issues concerning preschools and out-of-school centres, thereby taking part in most of the work described. She is personally responsible for the contents of this publication. This edition has been updated at the Ministry of Education and Research to include what has taken place during the period 2006–2014.

The tables and statistics have been produced by the National Agency for Education. The quotations are from discussions Barbara Martin Korpi had while working with individuals, ministers and others who were responsible for these issues.

When the book was published in 2006, she wrote: “In a retrospective view of this kind, it is easy to see the consistency with which Swedish childcare has been developed and how early on there was a clear vision about its purposes and objectives. The development of childcare in Sweden demonstrates what politics can achieve.”

She also cited a well-known English professor of economics, who said that what was extraordinary about Sweden was not that it had introduced its childcare model in the early 1970s, but that it had succeeded in retaining it throughout the years.

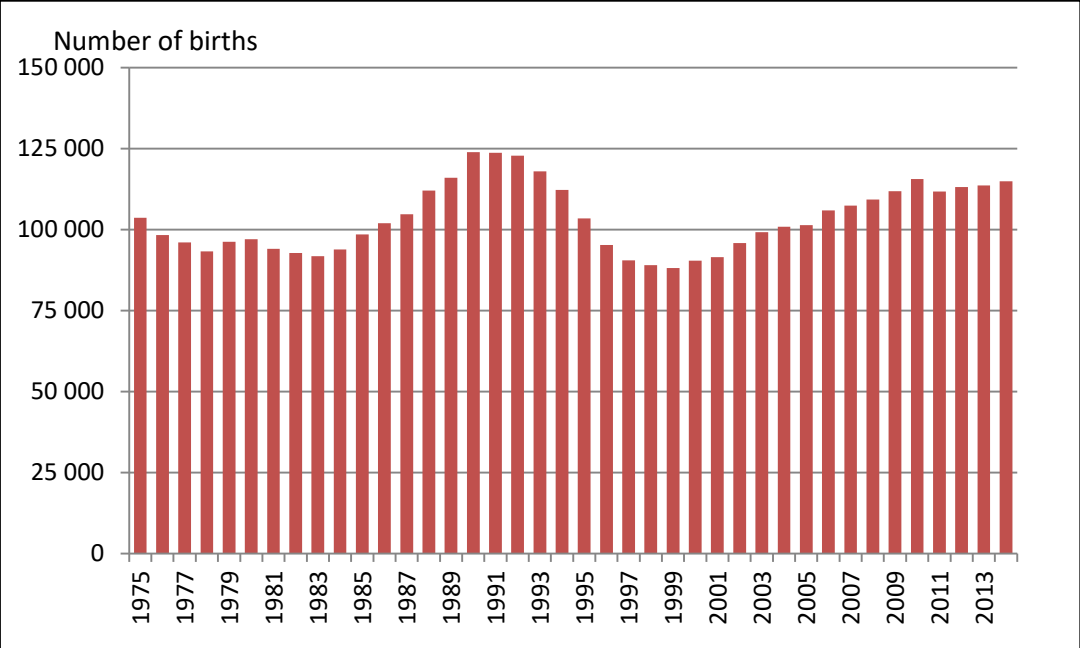
Stockholm, 29 april 2016  
Ministry of Education and Research

## List of photos

- Minister for Education, Gustav Fridolin, visits a preschool in Sundbyberg, outside of Stockholm, photo Lasse Allard, IBL.
- Katarina child crèche in Söder in Stockholm 1906, Stockholm City Museum.
- Engelbrekt's child crèche in Stockholm 1909, Stockholm City Museum.
- Child crèche in Stockholm in the 1930s, Stockholm City Museum.
- Children in a kindergarden with their teachers, Örebro County Museum.
- The two sisters, Ellen and Maria Moberg, Norrköping City Archive.
- A kindergarden in Södertälje 1938, Scanpix.
- Toddlers and child nurses at a day care centre 1967, photo Stig A Nilsson, Scanpix .
- The Palme family at their home in Vällingby 1969, photo Jan Delden, Scanpix.
- Father and child 1978, photo Beppe Arvidsson.
- Helping in everyday work 1978, photo Beppe Arvidsson.
- "Hoa-Hoa" and his baby, poster on parental insurance 1976, photo Reijo Rüster, Scanpix.
- Parents and children out demonstrating for day care centres and leisure-time centres 1975, photo Lars Groth, Scanpix.
- Groups of children of mixed ages 1978, photo Beppe Arvidsson.
- Prime Minister Olof Palme 1985, photo Jack Mikrut, Scanpix.
- Learning from each other 1978, photo Beppe Arvidsson.
- Minister for Schools, Göran Persson with school children 1989, Ministry of Education and Research.
- Children at preschool celebrating Lucia 1991, photo Lennart Isaksson, Scanpix .
- Preschool "Höjden", Stockholm 1998, photo Magnus Hartman, Scanpix.
- Study group from Sweden outside the town hall in Reggio Emilia 1993, privately owned.
- Sergio Spaggiari, head of child care, and Professor Loris Malaguzzi 1989, privately owned.
- Parents and children out demonstrating for the maximum fee in Stockholm 1999, photo Cecilia Larsson, Scanpix.
- The art room of a preschool 2006, Mikael Lundgren, Ministry of Education and Research.
- Learning about letters 2006, Mikael Lundgren, Ministry of Education and Research.
- Children from the Stella Nova preschool in Stockholm, photo Stella Nova.
- "Welcome to Botos restaurant" – poster drawing by children from Stella Nova, Stockholm.

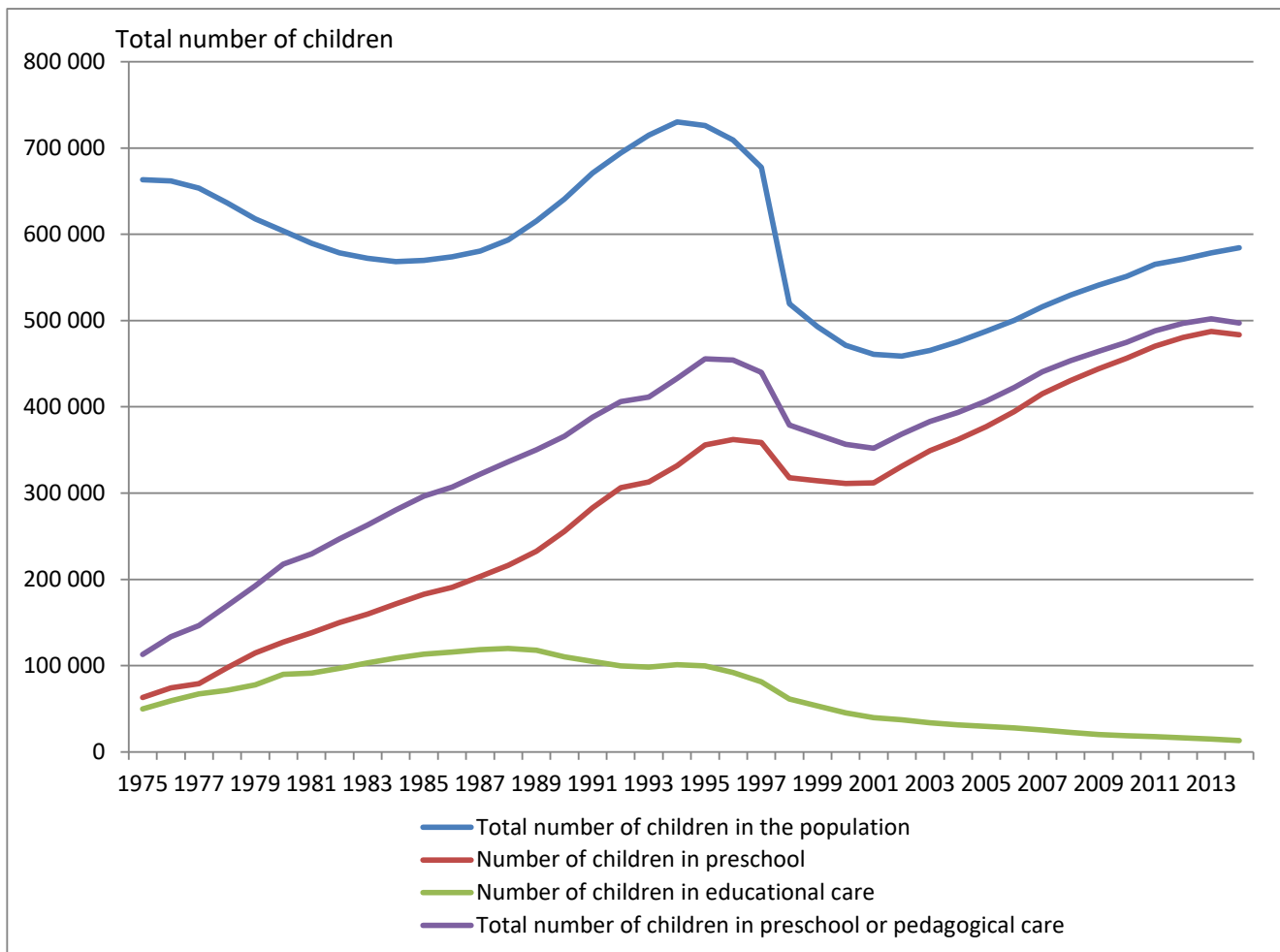
Tables and figures

Figure 1. Children born in 1975–2014.



Source: Statistics Sweden

Figure 2. All children aged 1–6/aged 1–5 in the population and the number of children in daycare/preschool, family day-care homes/part-time classes, 1975–2013



Source: National Agency for Education

Table 1. Full-year equivalent qualified employees in preschool in per cent, 2006–2014.

Number of full-year equivalent employees working with children.  
Total percentage of qualified employees

	Preschool teachers	Recreation instructors	Teachers	Child-minders	Recreation leaders	Qualified in other	No formal qualifications
2006	77 506	48	1	2	41	0	3 5
2007	80 396	49	1	3	40	0	2 5
2008	82 086	48	1	3	39	0	3 5
2009	83 715	50	1	3	39	0	3 5
2010	85 599	49	1	4	38	0	3 5
2011	88 872	49	1	4	38	0	3 5
2012	90 600	49	1	4	38	0	3 6
2013	91 675	49	1	3	37	0	3 6

Number of full-year equivalent employees working with children.  
Total percentage of qualified employees 2014

Total	Degree in preschool education	Degree in after-school care education	Bachelor/ Master of Education	Upper secondary programme to work with children	Some teacher training	No education or training to work with children
91 338	43	1	2	22	9	24

As of 2014, the information is based on individual data and data on the education of staff collected from Statistics Sweden's Education Register. In previous data collections, municipalities reported information on staff education levels. As certain organisations under private management have chosen not to report information on the number of full-year equivalent employees in preschool, the figures for 2014 are somewhat lower.

Table 2. Children in preschool distributed between municipal and independent preschools 2006–2014, in per cent

	Municipal preschools	Independent preschools	Total
2006	83	17	100
2007	83	17	100
2008	82	18	100
2009	81	19	100
2010	81	19	100
2011	81	19	100
2012	80	20	100
2013	80	20	100
2014	81	19	100

Source: National Agency for Education



Children from the Stella Nova preschool in Stockholm, photo Stella Nova.

Right, "Welcome to Botos restaurant" – poster drawing by children from Stella Nova, Stockholm

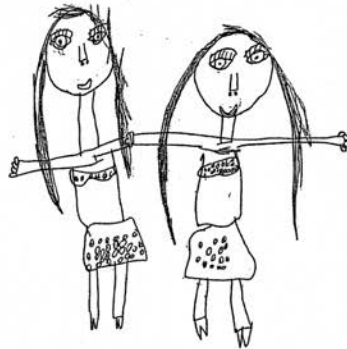


# VÄLKOMMEN TILL BOTOS RESTAURANG



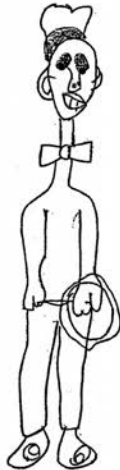
GOD MAT

BALET



MÅSDANS

HIPHOP



TREKLIGA SERVEDÖRER

